

**FAITH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

**TRAINING IRANIAN CHRISTIANS TO USE PERSIAN  
POETRY IN EVANGELISM**

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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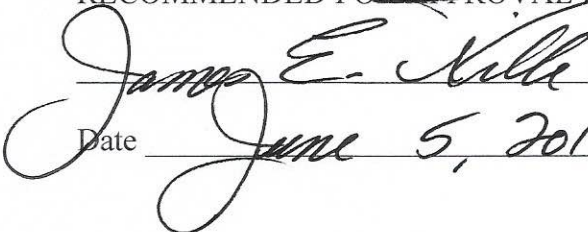


APPROVAL SHEET



TRAINING IRANIAN CHRISTIANS TO USE PERSIAN POETRY IN EVANGELISM

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## CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vi
ABSTRACT .....	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. PRESENTATION OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE STATEMENT .....	13
Problem .....	13
Purpose .....	19
3. THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE .....	20
God Desires Christians Verbally to Evangelize Strangers .....	20
God Desires Christians to Do Evangelism Contextually .....	28
God Desires Christian Leaders to Equip Christians to Evangelize Well . . . .	31
4. THEORETICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS .....	38
Effective Cross-Cultural Interaction Requires Multicultural Communication .....	38
Improved Communication Skills Aid Evangelism .....	43
Teaching and Training Enhance Believers in Evangelizing .....	49
5. PROJECT PLANS AND OBJECTIVES. ....	59
Objectives for Participants .....	59
Personal Objectives for the Project .....	60
6. PROCEDURES AND METHODS .....	61
7. ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF PROJECT DATA .....	71
Evaluation and Assessment Tools .....	71



Analysis and Evaluation of Participant's Data . . . . .	73
Analysis and Evaluation of Personal Data . . . . .	79
Analysis and Evaluation of Project Data . . . . .	84
Conclusion . . . . .	88
Appendix	
1. SELECTED LINES OF RUMI'S <i>MASNAVI</i> . . . . .	90
2. DEFINITIONS OF VOCABULARY FROM SELECTED LINES OF RUMI'S <i>MASNAVI</i> . . . . .	91
3. POETRY INTRODUCTION, TRANSITION, AND THE KORBANI PLAN OF SALVATION GOSPEL SHARE . . . . .	92
4. FACTS TAUGHT ABOUT IRANIAN CULTURE, RUMI, AND HIS POETM, <i>MASNAVI</i> . . . . .	94
5. PRE- AND POST-TEST ON IRANIAN CULTURE, RUMI, AND HIS POEM, <i>MASNAVI</i> . . . . .	95
6. TEACHABLE MOMENTS REPORT . . . . .	98
7. EXPERIENTIAL REPORT . . . . .	99
8. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS . . . . .	102
9. GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS . . . . .	103
10. FAITH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARCH RESEARCH PROJECT APPROVAL . . . . .	104
11. PROJECT PARTICIPANTS' INFORMED CONSENT FORM . . . . .	105
12. REQUEST FOR PROJECT PERMISSION FROM NEJAT CHURCH . . . . .	106
13. PROJECT PERMISSION FROM NEJAT CHURCH . . . . .	107
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	108
PERSONAL DATA SHEET . . . . .	118

## LIST OF TABLES

### Table

1. Cognitive Change of Participants toward the Stranger's Culture .....	74
2. Affective Change of Participants toward Doing Evangelism .....	76
3. Skill Development of Participants in Doing Evangelism Using Persian Poetry .....	78
4. The Usefulness of Persian Poetry in Evangelizing Iranians .....	88

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## ABSTRACT

The ministry project facilitator sought to train Iranian Christians to use Persian poetry for evangelizing Iranian strangers. The facilitator taught three one-hour class sessions in which project participants learned how to initiate conversation using the poetry of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, to transition the topic of discussion from poetry to the good news of Jesus Christ, to communicate their own testimony, and to express succinctly the gospel. Subsequently, in two two-hour sessions, project participants implemented the learned skills at a local shopping mall. The writer provided a thorough bibliography and extensive appendices. The project analysis demonstrated that with training and support Iranian Christians became more effective in evangelizing Iranian strangers, even though the benefits of using Persian poetry for that purpose were limited.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The world today is experiencing human migration in unprecedented numbers. The United Nations reported that the global number of migrants between the years 1990 and 2015 rose by 60%.<sup>1</sup> The same report claimed there to have been “244 million international migrants” traveling the globe in 2015 alone.<sup>2</sup> Of all migrating people groups, possibly the most prevalent and well-known migrants are the Syrians who have fled their country in unprecedented numbers during a decade of civil unrest and war. However, Syrians composes only a part of the migration phenomenon. Another nation that is contributing significantly to worldwide migration is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Though Iran has not been at war since the ending of the conflict it had with the neighboring nation of Iraq from 1980 to 1988, the nation nonetheless has been unable to retain large portions of its populace. The Pew Research Center claims that currently 1,120,000 Iranians are living outside of Iran.<sup>3</sup> Abbas Milani insists that this number is

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social, Affairs Population Division, *International Migration Report 2015*, ST/ESA/SER.A./384 (New York: UN, 2016), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Phillip Conner, “International Migration: Key Findings from the U.S., Europe and the World,” Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016, accessed October 26, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/15/international-migration-key-findings-from-the-u-s-europe-and-the-world/>.

higher, reporting that two million Iranians currently live outside of the country in which they were born.<sup>4</sup> Sebnem Koser Akcapar puts the number at four million.<sup>5</sup>

Shirin Hakimzadeh identifies three phases of emigration from Iran. Each phase has produced an increasingly larger number of people abandoning their country. The first phase (1950-1979) was during the latter period of the Pahlavi dynasty. The second phase (1980-1994) saw a significant upsurge among those leaving Iran due to the new government's oppression of dissidents and minorities, the Iran-Iraq War, and many Iranians' dissatisfaction with the new Islamic regime. Hakimzadeh summarizes the factors involved, which prompted so many Iranians to leave their homes during this period:

A second phase of emigration took place after the revolution. Socialist and liberal elements were the first to leave, followed by young men who fled military service and the Iran-Iraq War, followed by young women and families, escaping overly confining gender restrictions. Having a daughter was a decisive factor in a family's decision to flee since the post-revolution era forced women to wear the veil, offered decreased educational possibilities, and enforced obedience to male kin. Because the second wave included large numbers of professionals, entrepreneurs, and academics, it accelerated the "brain drain," a term used to describe the emigration of a country's most educated and highly skilled for better opportunities in another country. According to the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, right before the revolution and subsequent closure of all the universities in 1980, there were 16,222 professors teaching in Iran's higher education institutions. When the universities reopened in 1982, this figure had

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<sup>4</sup> Abbas Milani, "Exile and Identity" (lecture, third annual meeting of the Mehregan Foundation Seminar, San Diego, CA, September 2, 2005), 13, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://web.stanford.edu/~amilani/downloads/exileidentity.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Sebnem Koser Akcapar, "Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey," *The International Migration Review* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 826.

plummeted to 9,042. Similarly, the *Iran Times* estimated that one out of every three (5,000) physicians and dentists left after the revolution.<sup>6</sup>

The third phase of Iranian migration began in 1995 and continues to the present. During this third chapter, Iran has continued to experience a sizable loss of its citizens fleeing its borders. Economic opportunities have not progressed in this period because of ongoing global sanctions; religious persecution has intensified with even previously tolerated Christian churches now forced to close their doors;<sup>7</sup> and, after seeing the gross corruption of the 2009 elections,<sup>8</sup> the people have lost hope that the country's political climate might improve. One Iranian man applying for asylum who lived with my own family for over a year openly stated that he completely lost faith in the current Iranian government after witnessing the 2009 elections and the subsequent government crackdown on the students who protested about how the regime pretended at fair democratic processes. His mere presence in my home in North America was another shred of evidence proving that Iranians today are eager to flee their country.

While Iran is an example of a nation that is losing its citizens, Canada is a country that constantly is receiving thousands of migrants searching for a better home. Between the years 2000 and 2010, Canada received a staggering average of 226,000 migrants

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<sup>6</sup> Shirin Hakimzadeh, "Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home," *The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute* (September 1, 2006), accessed December 6, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iran-vast-diaspora-abroad-and-millions-refugees-home/>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Bradley, *Too Many To Jail: The Story of Iran's New Christians* (Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2014), 166-81.

<sup>8</sup> Bradley, 75-103.

every year. From 2010 to 2015, this amount increased to an average of 235,000 people annually, ranking Canada in sixth place globally among countries in its reception of migrants.<sup>9</sup> As of 2015, 7,780,000 people living permanently in Canada were born in other countries.<sup>10</sup> Referring to the ethnic mix in Canada, Maria L. Nacpil makes this conclusion:

In Canada, the foreign-born population represented 20.9% of the national population, the highest among the G8 nations. More than 200 ethnic origins were reported in its 2011 National Household Survey. The majority of its immigrants during the last five years have come from Asia, including the Middle East, with an increased share from Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America... Today, to say that Canada has become a hyphen-nation of mixed race identities hardly needs verification.”<sup>11</sup>

Iranians are included among those coming to Canada. Second only to the United States, Canada is tied with Germany for having the greatest number of foreign-born Iranians.<sup>12</sup> Though many Iranians preferred the United States or other countries in the first phase of migration, more recently in the second and third phases an increased number of Iranians have sought to make Canada their destination. A surge of Iranians has entered Canada particularly within the last two decades. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* summarizes the history:

As late as the Second World War there were only about a dozen Iranians in the country. Immigration remained very low through the 1950s and 60s. After the 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the monarchy and brought the Islamic government to power, immigration figures rose significantly. In the 1980s and

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Conner.

<sup>11</sup> Maria L. Nacpil, “The Church in an Age of Diaspora: Rethinking Mission,” *Didaskalia* 26 (Summer 2016): 138-39.

<sup>12</sup> Conner.



during most of the 1990s several thousand Iranians came to Canada each year, and the trend has continued to date.<sup>13</sup>

Hakimzadeh reports similar findings for a large influx of immigrants from Iran coming to Canada within the last twenty-five years:

Like Iranians in the United States, Iranians in Canada are a highly skilled immigrant group with relatively high levels of education. In contrast to the U.S. community, most of Canada's Iranian immigrants were admitted between 1996 and 2001. In addition to the political refugees of the second wave, in the 1990s a growing number of Iranians took advantage of Canada's point-based immigration system, migrating there as entrepreneurs and investors. In 1994, 12 percent of Iranian immigrants in Canada were entrepreneurs and investors. According to Canada's 2001 census, the Iranian-born population increased by 34 percent between 1996 (47,410) and 2001 (71,985). Among Canadian permanent residents from Africa and the Middle East, Iran consistently ranked as the top source country between 1995 and 2004.<sup>14</sup>

The 2016 Canadian government census counted 214,200 people living in Canada whose mother tongue was Farsi.<sup>15</sup> While the greatest number of them live in Toronto, Ontario, the second highest concentration of Iranians in Canada is found in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia. A local, Vancouver newspaper claimed that the number of people of Iranian descent in the city's metropolitan area is more than 36,000.<sup>16</sup> The Canadian government confirmed this claim to be correct in its 2016 census, counting

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<sup>13</sup> *Canadian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Iranian Canadians," accessed October 27, 2017, <http://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/iranians/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hakimzadeh.

<sup>15</sup> Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2016 Census*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001 (Ottawa: 2017), accessed October 27, 2017, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Todd, "Iranian-Canadians Find Road to Integration is a Rocky One," *The Vancouver Sun*, August 1, 2016, accessed October 26, 2017, <http://www.vancouversun.com/life/douglas+todd+iranian+canadians+find+road+integration+rocky/11639465/story.html>.

43,470 people in British Columbia whose mother tongue is Farsi.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority of these people counted throughout the province are living in Vancouver's metropolitan area.

What religious commitments do Iranians hold? The Central Intelligence Agency of the United States claims that the percentage of Muslims in the nation of Iran is higher than that of any of the other twenty countries, which the agency categorizes as "Middle Eastern and North African nations." That percentage is 99.4%.<sup>18</sup> Most of those (90-95%) are of the Shia sect of Islam.<sup>19</sup> The remaining Muslims are mostly Sunni and live scattered in pockets throughout the nation, though many Sunnis are located in the border regions of Iran, particularly in the Western Kurdish region, the Northeastern Turkmen region, and the Southeastern Baloch region. While there exists substantial evidence to doubt the internalized faith commitment of Iranians to Islam, nonetheless these percentages are impressive.

Among the numerous Iranians who emigrate, however, this façade of religious homogeneity fractures. The greater religious diversity among émigrés from Iran is explained partially by the fact that religious minorities are severely persecuted in their country of origin. Muslims who are not Shia and people of other faith commitments have abundant reason to escape from the systematic governmental and societal ostracism, deprivation, and persecution, which they experience in Iran in every area of their lives.

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<sup>17</sup> Statistics Canada.

<sup>18</sup> US Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, s.vv. "Middle East, Iran," accessed October 27, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

These religious minorities include, among others, Baha'is, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians of various denominations including The Armenian Apostolic Church of Iran, The Assyrian Church of the East of Iran, The Chaldean Catholic Church of Iran, The Roman Catholic Church of Iran, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and The Anglican Diocese of Iran. A second explanation for the greater religious diversity among those leaving Iran is that the same people who self-identify as Muslim in their homeland abandon that religious claim once having exited the country. Advantages for those leaving Iran to no longer claim religious commitment to Islam include achieving religious refugee status with the United Nations as well as greater possibility for assimilation into the secular milieu of Western nations, in which the majority of émigrés settle. As an example of this significantly greater religious diversity among Iranians who no longer live in Iran, a survey conducted in the United States by the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans discovered the following ratios: 40% Muslim, 40% “no particular religion,” and 20% to be roughly equally divided between Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.<sup>20</sup> B. Neil Woodhouse reports a similar ratio of Islamic loyalty, citing at least two studies that only found “up to a third of Iranian immigrants to Western destinations retain Islamic faith commitments.”<sup>21</sup> *The Canadian Encyclopedia* confirms this claim for Western nations among the Iranian segment of Canada's population. Despite the purportedly highest percentage of Islamic religious adherence in their home

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<sup>20</sup> Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, accessed October 2, 2014, <http://www.paaia.org/CMS/demographics>.

<sup>21</sup> B. Neil Woodhouse, “‘You are Jesus, and I am Your Bird’: Christ, Persian Poetry, and Theological Imagination in the Iranian Diaspora,” *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 418.

country, once free from their country's repressive government, Iranians are notably less Muslim and more secular than those coming from other Muslim-majority nations. The encyclopedia reports the following results from its analysis of several Muslim-majority people groups that have settled in Canada:

Compared with other communities originating from Muslim-majority countries, Iranians are on average more secular. A recent study by York University scholars, for example, showed that in contrast to Canadian Pakistanis, Afghans and Palestinians, over 80% of Iranian-Canadians do not consider themselves religious and are "tending to the secular."<sup>22</sup>

A local, Vancouver newspaper also suggested a relatively low commitment to Islam, claiming that as little as 15% of British Columbian Iranians attend a mosque regularly.<sup>23</sup> The same article states, "While Iran is often portrayed in the Western media as a country full of rigorous Shia Muslims, many Iranian-Canadians say they have gone a different path."<sup>24</sup>

Diaspora Iranians, then, hold a diverse mix of religious loyalties and opinions. The vast majority possesses intimate familiarity with Shia Islam, though their individual stories from their experiences within their homeland have included varying degrees of religious adherence and heart-felt commitment. In their present circumstances, however, diaspora Iranians tend to be secular, though retaining openness to spiritual issues and, consciously or unconsciously, still possessing an underlying Islamic worldview. One

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<sup>22</sup> *Canadian Encyclopedia*.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Todd, "Iranian-Canadians Find Road to Integration is a Rocky One," *The Vancouver Sun*, August 1, 2016, accessed October 26, 2017, <http://www.vancouversun.com/life/douglas+todd+iranian+canadians+find+road+integration+rocky/11639465/story.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

notable example of this religious profile was an Iranian man I met while doing door-to-door evangelism in a suburb of Seattle, Washington in the United States of America.

When my evangelism partner and I initially testified to him about our faith in Jesus Christ as the King and Savior of the world, this man claimed to have no religious commitment whatsoever. He was exceptionally belligerent and claimed to be an atheist. However, as we continued in conversation with him, he revealed his underlying Muslim beliefs and commitments. He may not have been aware himself of how Islamic his religious views were or that his assertions were actually theistic and Islamic in nature. Nevertheless, “Muslim” was not the label he wanted to use to describe his religious allegiance. Adjectives, then, that may aptly describe the hearts of many Iranians in diaspora, including this man, are: conflicted, searching, and open.

The Christian church in Western nations has an opportunity and obligation to serve and bless in Jesus’ name these millions of immigrants. About the current situation, William D. Taylor writes, “Over the last two decades, the world truly changed. Mission is from every nation to every nation.”<sup>25</sup> Later, he adds, “The old paradigms of ‘home and foreign, here and overseas, near and far’ are over. The world and its cultures are everywhere, especially in the world-class cities.”<sup>26</sup> Because of this development, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization observes, “Many previously presumed to be ‘unreached’ people from the 10/40 windows are now accessible due to the global trend

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<sup>25</sup> William D. Taylor, “Global and Personal Reflections on Training/Equipping for Cross-Cultural Ministry Today,” *Missiology* 36, no. 1 (January 2008): 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

of migrant populations moving ‘from south to north, and from east to west.’”<sup>27</sup> Once a minister himself among Iranians living in the European nation of Holland, Roy Oksnevad writes, “As church leaders, we must pay attention to our world’s changing religious landscape. Without a doubt, we are witnessing an unprecedented shift in populations due to war, natural disasters, economic disasters and political upheavals.”<sup>28</sup>

Iranians are included among those coming from nations that are difficult for the Christian church to access. But, because many of them have left Iran, new opportunities exist. Gregory Seltz observes this new multicultural reality and urges the church to respond wisely to appropriate the opportunity.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Oksnevad calls the church to rise to the challenge of doing ministry within, and preparing leaders for a new context:

The world in which we live, teach and preach is seeing seismic shifts in populations and ideas. Our [seminary] students are entering a world in which living and working alongside people of other faiths is now normative. Islam is the only world religion whose foundational teaching redefines and retells the biblical narrative. Our thinking needs to reflect this new reality, and we must prepare evangelical Christians to be relevant in today’s society.<sup>30</sup>

What can and should Christians do in response to the arrival of thousands of migrants? Though refugee resettlement activities, language classes, job placement, diaconal ministry, and simple friendship are all worth considering, communicating the

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<sup>27</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Scattered to Gather: Embracing the Global Trend of Diaspora* (2010): 27.

<sup>28</sup> Roy Oksnevad, “Seismic Shifts: Islam and the World—How Now Should We Preach, Teach, and Write?,” *EFCA Now* (May 20, 2016), accessed December 7, 2017, <https://blog.efca.org/blog/theology-culture/seismic-shifts-islam-and-world>.

<sup>29</sup> Seltz, Gregory, “Empowering Confident Confessor-Servant Evangelists: Twenty-first-century Multicultural Mission Work,” *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 205-15.

<sup>30</sup> Oksnevad.

news of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ is certainly also appropriate. The mandate of the Lord of the church obligates believers to speak of what God has done in Christ and how through faith in Jesus' name sinners will be saved. The focus of this paper is to explore how this can be done among Iranians in diaspora through a particular study among the Iranians of Greater Vancouver. Many of these immigrants from the Islamic Republic of Iran have never heard the Christian gospel fairly presented or explained. As the church in the West is implementing Christ's commission to be his witnesses among those coming from Iran, significant numbers of Iranians are responding positively. I personally know of numerous such accounts of Iranians who have come to the United States and Canada, heard the gospel from a friend or co-worker, and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Matthias Pankau and Uwe Siemon-Netto, writing in *Christianity Today*, have reported similar accounts happening among Iranians in the nation of Germany.<sup>31</sup> Though skeptics ask if these conversions are merely attempts to gain asylum or assimilate better into a new context, the authors give evidence that the vast majority of Iranians claiming newfound Christian faith are genuine believers. Despite the existence of some tares growing alongside of the wheat, God has presented to the Western church a new field of ministry. In response, Maria L. Nacpil urges the church to act:

Until recently, the church has paid little attention to the relationship between international migration and her mission to bring the Gospel to the whole world. The emerging context is taking the church to uncharted territory it never dared to enter, raising new questions and demanding a fresh understanding of her place in a post-Christendom era that has not been imagined before. In the words of David Bosch, "[Christians] in the West have been jolted out of their complacency." The

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<sup>31</sup> Pankau, Matthias and Uwe Siemon-Netto, "The Other Iranian Revolution: In 'Godless' Eastern Germany, Iranian Refugees Surprise Pastors with Their Interest in Christianity," *Christianity Today* 56, no. 7 (July-August 2012): 44-47.

implications to the church's mission are serious and are further complicated by legacies of colonialism, society's attitudes to diversity, immigration policies, border security, and individual and community rights. While it is true that the mobility of human beings is nothing new and unavoidable in a time of globalization, what we find remarkably new is that the global migrant movement is so extraordinary that it forces the church to wrestle with what is possible and thinkable in this diasporic reality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Maria L. Nacpil, "The Church in an Age of Diaspora: Rethinking Mission," *Didaskalia* 26 (Summer 2016): 136.



## CHAPTER 2

### PRESENTATION OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

#### **Problem**

For many people, opening a conversation with a stranger is an unappealing prospect. If the objective is to do so for the purpose of discussing a personal and controversial topic such as religious faith, beginning such a discussion may seem not only unappealing, but also impossible. However, when the speaker has good reason to hope that what he or she says will be well received, to initiate discussion is less daunting. A topic that an Iranian stranger usually happily will receive is a conversation about Persian poetry. Quoting lines from this body of literature to an Iranian stranger may be surprisingly welcomed. This project studied the expediency of utilizing Persian poetry within an initial dialogue with an Iranian stranger. Does the use of poetry lines in evangelism serve as a point of connection between the evangelist and listener, decrease the tension between the two parties, and facilitate a transition toward a substantive discussion about Jesus Christ, who he is, and what he did? This is the question that this project sought to answer.

It was by no means a forgone conclusion what the answer would be. As I discussed the idea of employing Persian poetry for purposes of evangelism among my Iranian Christian friends, I received both positive and negative reactions. Those who saw it as a potentially productive approach affirmed that Iranians are usually at least familiar with the names of their poets and some of their lines, appreciative of their culture's strong

history of poetry, and favorably inclined to the prospect of hearing someone reciting some verses of Persian poetry. This broad admiration of the classical Persian poets is evidenced by something as simple as the frequency at which Iranians discuss their national poets in any given conversation. I have had numerous Iranians offer to me their thoughts about various poets. For example, one of my Iranian friends once expressed to me that he so deeply appreciates how one of Iran's poets of the early classical period, Abu 'I-Qasim Ferdowsi Tusi, usually known simply as Ferdowsi, helped to save the Persian language. Ferdowsi wrote *Shahnama*, the world's longest epic poem of more than 50,000 couplets about the mythical and factual history of Persian kings from the creation of the world to the time of the conquest of Islam concluding with the reign of Khosrau II (590-628 AD). And he wrote his masterpiece in the Persian language. Historians, including my friend who is an accomplished archeologist, consider that by this work Ferdowsi preserved the Persian language from extinction as in fact other languages of the Middle East disappeared from common usage following the invasion of the Arabs and the dominance of Islam and its Arabic language. Other Iranians with whom I have spoken have expressed their admiration and love for Khwaja Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Shirazi, often simply known as Hafez, including the famous use of his poetry as oracle, which involves asking a question and then opening the pages of a book of his poetry. The first lines on the page upon which one's eyes fall are supposedly the spiritually guided answer to the question, which was posed. Those with whom I spoke were utilizing the works of Hafez in this way at a party and doing so for the sake of laughter, but others engage the practice for more urgent purposes. Fewer Iranians with whom I spoke mentioned their appreciation for Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, known to Iranians as

Molana, though numerous restaurants are named after this poet including Rumi Restaurant in Kirkland, Washington and one Iranian Christian man that lives in British Columbia, Canada told me that he takes time every day to read lines from this poet's famous work, *Masnavi*.

Despite this deep admiration and appreciation that Iranians possess for their classical poets and their works, several of the Iranians with whom I discussed the proposal of this project considered it misguided and cited the following reasons. First, the vocabulary and grammar of most of the classical poems are from such a long time ago that for modern Farsi speakers the language is extremely difficult to understand. Several people with whom I have spoken have compared it to an English speaker trying to discern lines of Shakespeare. Referring specifically to Rumi's *Masnavi*, one Iranian friend said that the six-volume poem is very much *more* difficult for Farsi speakers than is even Shakespeare for English speakers. He said that out of the 70,000,000 people of Iran today there might be ten who understand Rumi's poem in its original language! The second reason against the advisability of this project's proposal that some of my Iranian companions have cited is that Iranians today no longer read nor are very familiar with their culture's poetry. The speaker particularly cited the younger generation as being out of touch with classical Persian poetry. This is doubly true for Iranian youth in diaspora who are not only separated from their homeland's poetry by the electronically disseminated global youth culture, but also by geography, having moved physically to one of the many Western nations in which the Iranian diaspora lives. The third reason some of my Iranian friends named as to why this project's proposal is misguided is that the classical Persian poets are too Islamic for use in an evangelistic encounter. "Why

bring up Islam?” said one friend, when I told him I was hoping to use some lines about Jesus from Rumi’s *Masnavi*. He went on to explain that in his view Iranians are tired of Islam and that Rumi’s writings fundamentally are not separated from that faith. His protest is factually supported by the abundant quotations of the Qur’an within the *Masnavi*. His opinion is that the purpose of the conversation to introduce the Messiah of Christianity would be spoiled by the Islamic roots of any of the classical Persian works of poetry that hold to a great and prophetic Jesus, but not the Jesus who was divine, crucified, and resurrected. The final objection to the proposal of this project that Iranian friends of mine have raised is that it is simply unnecessary. They believe that approaching Iranians to talk about the Christian faith does not require an introduction or an element of cultural connection within the course of the conversation as Persian poetry may provide. I do admit the soundness of this particular objection, since in my evangelistic experience of going to the doors of people’s homes as well as in the marketplace I have had usually very little difficulty beginning creed-oriented conversations with Iranian strangers. Middle Easterners in general, Persians included, are much readier to talk about ultimate faith issues than Westerners who generally view religion as a private matter.

Despite these objections, I remained emboldened to test my proposed solution to the problem of beginning a conversation about Jesus with an Iranian stranger. The reason was that in response to the first cited cause for doubting the usefulness of classical Persian poetry, namely that it is not understandable to today’s Farsi speaker, there was a simple solution. I would use a modern Farsi translation of Rumi’s original *Masnavi*. If *Masnavi* is roughly the equivalent to a pre-Shakespearean, English work such as *Beowulf*

and is thus so difficult to understand for modern Iranians, then the work simply need be translated to modern Farsi as repeatedly has been done with *Beowulf*. This process would render the lines of *Masnavi* chosen for use in this project more accessible to the common listener among the Iranian diaspora with whom we hoped to speak.

To the second objection, namely that Iranians today are simply not familiar with Persian poetry as Iranians in the past were versant with the classical poets, I responded that it may indeed be true that there is less familiarity, but that does not mean that there is no connection to, nor any respect remaining in today's generation for this body of literature. The objection also was undermined by the fact that the several people who suggested this point were all themselves extensively conversant with the material. To name a specific example, one of those who lamented the loss of familiarity among Iranians today was the same man who religiously reads from Rumi's *Masnavi* on a *daily* basis.

The protest that the works of the classical Persian poets are too Islamic for productive use in Christian evangelism is formidable. However, at least to some degree religious commitment is in the eye of the beholder. Not everyone holds the view of the Iranian Christian who told me that he considered Rumi's usefulness for evangelism as highly dubious. As anecdotal evidence, one American (non-Iranian), Christian friend of mine became ecstatic when I mentioned that I was planning to explore the use of Sufi works from the classical period for the purposes of evangelism. For him and some of his (American evangelical) friends, the works of these classical poets help them better to know and love the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. His view is that these poets and their works offer significant and helpful material, which, if Islamic, is vague enough

in that regard to in no way prevent Christians from utilizing the literature to know better and grow in discipleship following the Jesus Christ of Christianity. Woodhouse agrees and summarizes his assessment of the utility of the classical body of Persian poetry as a convincing bridge between Iranian culture and Christianity:

As previously noted, many Iranians utilize poetry to interpret their experiences and give voice to ideal futures; preserving at least some continuity between that poetry and Christian belief signifies God's work in Iran's cultural and religious past, and establishes that the gospel does not require that past to be entirely jettisoned to make room for Christ. The poetic presentations of Jesus which corroborate the gospel may then offer compelling sites of dialogue, inviting Iranians to reflect on the one who offers true access to the Father above.<sup>33</sup>

The final objection that some raised against the proposal of this project was that introducing an evangelistic conversation with lines of classical poetry or inserting the lines at any point once the conversation has begun is simply unnecessary since Iranians have no trouble delving into the topic of God and issues related to religious faith. The rebuttal to this position is that having lines of this body of poetry memorized and ready for use in situations of evangelism can at worst have a neutral effect on the conversation and at best might be a very positive addition that builds rapport between the listener and the evangelist and offers a perfect opportunity for talking about Jesus without immediately having to force a discussion about the religion of Christianity. William N. Wysham offers this analysis of the opportunity Persian poetry affords to the church's mission:

It seems safe to conclude that one of the reasons why the people of Iran have seemed more ready than other Muslims to listen to and accept the Christian message, is that their own great literature has provided them with glimpses of its truth. This is particularly true as to the personality and uniqueness of Jesus.

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<sup>33</sup> B. Neil Woodhouse, "'You are Jesus, and I am Your Bird': Christ, Persian Poetry, and Theological Imagination in the Iranian Diaspora," *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 425.

Certain it is that Iranian thought has moved far beyond the meager, and often twisted, conception of Jesus which orthodox Islam provides, towards a far greater and richer personality. The name of Jesus is a familiar one in Iranian poetry, the Sufi poets in particular citing him as an exemplar and finding in his teachings and good deeds a fertile source of illustration.<sup>34</sup>

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to train a selected group of Iranian Christians from Nejat Church to use Persian poetry in evangelism.

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<sup>34</sup> William N. Wysham, "Jesus in the Poetry of Iran." *The Muslim World* 42, no. 2 (April 1952): 104.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

#### **God Desires Christians Verbally to Evangelize Strangers**

There are at least two arguments, which Christians present in an attempt to disprove the assertion that God desires Christians verbally to evangelize strangers. The first is one that few Christians actually dare to articulate, but it is nevertheless the cause of them not evangelizing. It is the pluralistic notion that there are many ways to find God and enter heaven: Christianity is simply one of many valid means to accomplish these goods ends. This is the dominant belief about religion today in Western culture. Doing Christian evangelism, therefore, is viewed as arrogant and offensive because it presupposes the opposite of this accepted tenant. Doing evangelism assumes that the other person's religious commitment is in need of replacement or, at the least, requiring significant amendment.<sup>35</sup>

Many Christians might not know consciously that they have accepted these pluralistic beliefs, but some have openly confirmed them. Robert M. Cooper, for example, concludes his discussion on evangelism by interpreting Jesus' parable of the vineyard laborers who work different amounts of time yet are all paid the same wage. He openly espouses a pluralistic interpretation of the parable, stating that the three different sets of laborers who worked the entire day, half of the day, and only the final hour of the

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<sup>35</sup> Roger S. Greenway, "The Ethics of Evangelism," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (April 1993): 148.



day are Jews, Christians, and Muslims, respectively. Yet, he suggests, the three religious communities are all working for the same goal, the Kingdom of God, and in the same vineyard, which is God's world:

The Christian laborer may believe that there is only a Christian vineyard which is being worked. The Muslim laborer may believe that there is only a Muslim vineyard being worked. But both work the same vineyard. They work for the kingdom they envisage. They plan for the achievement of a goal which can be articulated in the particular terms of their incurably particular lives. They think to achieve a kingdom, to be the instruments of the coming of the kingdom they envisage. The kingdom-come is one they could not know but can begin to recognize when — we may presume — they begin to converse, after the back-biting and the aborted recriminations, about the kingdom-come which they share.<sup>36</sup>

The implication Cooper makes is that all the laborers receive the same single denarius, whether they are Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. So, for Cooper evangelism's goal is not the conversion of the non-Christian, but rather a journey of becoming more aware of one's own faith and its fundamental connection with other religious expressions:

I am making a fairly simple and straightforward claim here: evangelism-mission necessarily drives the evangelist-missionary to the limits of his belief, to the edge of faith — drives him, happily — one hopes — to find that faith is finally inarticulable because it is unfathomable. This sort of evangelism-mission is perhaps the hardest task of religion for it drives toward faith where every account for faith, i.e., every belief system, creed, or aspect of cult, is found to be bankrupt. Every such task seems to be an abortive "raid on the inarticulate." One returns spent, but richer.<sup>37</sup>

Cooper assesses evangelism primarily not to be a clear proclamation of God's love for lost sinners through his Son, Jesus, who became incarnate in our world's historic reality, died on a cross, and three days later arose from the dead. Rather, it is a

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<sup>36</sup> Robert M. Cooper, "Christian Evangelism in a Religiously Pluralistic World," *Anglican Theological Review, Supplement Series* (November 8, 1979): 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

conversation between two or more people of at least two or more religious commitments who through the discussion of what each person believes discover that they cannot fully describe the mystery of their respective doctrines because all religious systems are grounded in the same infinitely mysterious, divine being.

Cooper's assertion is that the two laborers in the vineyard, one a Christian and the other a Muslim, although possibly upset with each other as are the laborers in Jesus' parable, do not finally have distinct destinies. If the mountain has many sides, and finally everyone climbing whichever slope reaches the top, then why should a Christian evangelize?

While seeking to be as charitable and gracious to people of all faiths, orthodox Christianity cannot accept the pluralistic claim that there is any other way for sinners to be reconciled to God apart from Jesus Christ. This, then, is the basis for the urgent command, which Jesus makes to his disciples that they be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) and that they make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19-20). Paul asks in Rom 10:14-15:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'<sup>38</sup>

There is no equivocation in Paul concerning the urgency of the preacher's assignment.

The gospel, that those with "beautiful feet" disperse, is not a message that God's mercy is

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<sup>38</sup> Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* (North American Edition) published by Zondervan Bible Publishers and copyrighted by the International Bible Society in 1973, 1978, and 1984.

available through many means but that for all people God's mercy is given through a particular Savior who is Jesus the Nazarene.

The second objection to doing verbal evangelism that Christians raise is that talk is cheap. Those who hold this viewpoint insist that the active demonstration of a Christian lifestyle within the church and the world is a more effective witness than a spoken testimony. Among other examples, Scripture's quotation of Jesus in John's gospel (13:35) is offered as evidence for this position: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The argument is that our announcement that Jesus is Lord and Savior is chiefly made through our actions and the implementation of the Lord's call to be his disciples. Gregory A. Boyd leans in this direction when he describes "evangelism" as "doing what we are."<sup>39</sup> He explains how he previously misunderstood evangelism, "In my earlier years, I thought evangelism sought to convince people that Christianity is right and to save them from eternal torment while we are headed for eternal bliss."<sup>40</sup>

Boyd's emphasis for a Christian to live a Christ-like life both within the church and in service to the world is biblically sound. But, he has overcorrected. While the Western church does need to hear Boyd's warning that it must be cruciform in shape, neither may it forget the necessity of public, verbal proclamation of the gospel. In my own experience in the church, I have heard people use the social gospel as an excuse for not speaking about Christ. Some would support their position that verbal witnessing is an

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, "Advancing the Cruciform Revolution: A Kingdom Perspective on Evangelism," *Word & World* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 410.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

inferior form of evangelism by quoting Saint Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.” Unfortunately, for their argument, however, Saint Francis never said that.<sup>41</sup>

While heeding the caution of Boyd and others that the gospel must be practically applied, the verbal expression of the gospel remains necessary if evangelism is to be accomplished. Jesus’ apostles in Jerusalem did do miracles of mercy and their communal life was characterized by deeds of service and love, but arguably their primary activity was to verbally articulate the message of salvation. Acts 5:42 records, “Day after day, in the temple course and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, likewise, had an emphasis on the spoken message. As an example of this, note his activity in the city of Ephesus as recorded in Acts 19:9-10: “Paul... took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” Jack Jackson claims the primacy of verbal proclamation in gospel communication when he states, “Though evangelism may be more than verbal proclamation alone, evangelism is never less than verbal proclamation of the gospel.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Roger S. Greenway asserts the verbal character of the Christian mission, as well as its clear aim of seeking the audience’s faith response:

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Galli, “Speak the Gospel: If Necessary Use Words,” *Christianity Today* (May 21, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Jack Jackson, “Decoupling Evangelism and Coercion: Early Methodism for Twenty-First Century Mission,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 54.

Evangelism in the Christian sense means to communicate the good news about Jesus Christ. It means presenting the message in such a way that those who hear it are confronted by God's revelation and are challenged to turn from their former beliefs and practices to become Christ's disciples and be incorporated into the visible fellowship of Christian believers. Without question, an aim of evangelism is conversion."<sup>43</sup>

Evangelism, then, is a verbal articulation of the good news that should be offered not only to people with whom we have existing relationships but also among those whom we do not know. From his context of student ministry, evangelism professor, Jim Found, asserts how words are the *sin-qua-non* of gospel communication: "No matter what country the students go to, their life of genuine love and willing servanthood does make an impression and may lead to relationships with people, but the Gospel itself is a message that is to be expressed in words."<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Greenway emphasizes that it is not an option for Christians to share their faith with non-believers; it is an integral component of their faith:

Evangelism is an activity inherent to Christianity. Evangelism is not an option but a privilege and expectation of Christian discipleship. Christ commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, peoples, and races (*patita ta ethne*), calling them "to open their eyes and turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in him" (Matt. 28:19; Acts 26:18).<sup>45</sup>

Edgar Krentz makes the assertion that Jesus' mandate to make disciples in Matthew's final chapter is the theme of that apostle's entire gospel and challenges the

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<sup>43</sup> Greenway, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Found, "Teaching Cross-Cultural Evangelism," *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 2 (November 2015): 257.

<sup>45</sup> Greenway, 147-48.

church to return to its central purpose.<sup>46</sup> Following the World Council of Churches' meeting in Brazil in 1996, Lesslie Newbigin similarly challenged the contemporary church to remain focused on the centrality of gospel proclamation: the message of God's reconciliation offered to the world through Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> Recently many Christians have even contended that evangelism is an essential activity of the church. Though readily admitting its importance, Calvin Van Reken refuses to describe evangelism that way. Under the Reformed rubric of identifying the church's three essential marks as the pure preaching of the Word, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the faithful administration of church discipline, Van Reken argues that evangelism falls under the first of these, the pure preaching of the Word. As the giver and withholder of special grace, the church does evangelism as an act offering special grace to those who have not yet received it by faith in the Word that is preached, nor yet have been confirmed in it by receiving the signs and seals of faith in the sacraments, nor yet have been nurtured in it by the discipleship and discipline processes of the local congregation. Van Reken, then, will not name evangelism alone as basic to the nature of the church, but he will readily rank evangelism as a necessary component of one of the church's three essential marks.<sup>48</sup>

As Van Reken asserted that evangelism is critical to, though not central to the church's identity, so Kent Yinger agrees on the basis of a nuanced study of the Pauline

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<sup>46</sup> Edgar Krentz, "'Make Disciples'--Matthew on Evangelism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 1 (February 2006): 23-41.

<sup>47</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Dialogue of Gospel and Culture: Reflections on the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 2 (April 1997): 50-52.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin P. Van Reken, "The Mission of a Local Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (November 1997): 344-67.

corpus that the apostle's expectation is not for evangelism to be the central purpose of each individual Christian. However, Yinger does demonstrate how Paul positively expected every congregation as a whole to be actively involved in the dissemination of the gospel.<sup>49</sup> In concurrence, Aaron Wheeler likewise argues for the Christian church to no longer allow evangelism to be the professional work of an elite set of missionaries. As the Reformation championed the priesthood of all believers, Wheeler argues that today's church must discover a renewed vision of the "commissioning of all believers."<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, it is manifestly evident that God expects Christians to do evangelism. Not every believer has the gift *per se* (Eph 4:11), and not every Christian may be as personally involved in proselytizing as some other Christians are occupied with the activity, but it is incumbent upon every believer to be prepared at all times to give an account for the hope that they have (1 Pt 3:15), which is a testimony, a form of evangelism. And though a single local church may not cease to be such if it is unable to evangelize, evangelism does fall within the category of the pure preaching of the Word, which is an inextricable function of any Christian body. Jesus' commission in Matthew "to make disciples of all nations" (Krentz), Paul's expectation of all of his congregations to be involved actively in mission (Yinger), and the Holy Spirit's promptings in the church for 2,000 years (as echoed by Jackson, Greenway, Found, Newbigin and Wheeler) make plain that God desires Christians verbally to evangelize strangers.

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<sup>49</sup> Kent L. Yinger, "Paul and Evangelism: A Missiological Challenge from New Testament Specialists," *Missiology* 37, no. 3 (July 2009): 385-96.

<sup>50</sup> Aaron Wheeler, "The Commissioning of All Believers: Toward a More Holistic Model of Global Discipleship," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 2 (April 2015): 148-162.

### **God Desires Christians to Do Evangelism Contextually**

When the apostle, Peter, urged the believers living in the present-day nation of Turkey to be prepared to explain the reason for their hope, he cautioned them to “do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15). One aspect of gentle and respectful communication of the gospel is contextualized linguistic usage to make a new message understandable. Peter’s admonition aligns with the practice of accommodation practiced by Paul, which he explains in 2 Cor 9:19-23:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

Luke A. Veronis also suggests that today’s church can learn from Paul in how he shapes a particular approach for presentation to a specific audience:

From Saint Paul we see how he preached to the Jews as a Jew, but presented the gospel in a different way among the Gentiles. For example, among the philosophical and idolatrous Athenians, Saint Paul mentioned nothing about the Jewish background and fulfilled prophecies of the Messiah Jesus. Instead, he dealt with the Greeks at their level. He didn’t condemn them for their gross idolatry, but instead chose to find good in their worship: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the Unknown God. Therefore, the one who you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23). From this introduction, he proceeded to talk about topics relevant to the Greek mind. He even quoted Greek philosophers and pagan poets to support his apology of the faith. In this way, Saint Paul contextualized the gospel and minimized the chances of his Gentile audience rejecting his message simply because of a cultural or religious bias. So our sensitivity of proclaiming the Gospel with creativity, flexibility, boldness, contextualization, and truth, creating an intimate, transforming relationship



between the hearer and God, are essential characteristics of a proper method for mission.<sup>51</sup>

How far should Christians go in contextualizing the gospel in order to effectively communicate its message? Though Paul would make significant accommodation so that his message about Christ might be understood, he would not breach moral boundaries nor would he manipulate the Scriptural witness. Paul wrote in 2 Cor 4:2, “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.” Do we deceive people when we proclaim the gospel while using texts, which the Holy Spirit has not inspired?

Greenway recognizes that some Christians do not approve of efforts to contextualize the gospel. He writes, “Scholarly efforts to contextualize the Christian faith in cultures dominated by other religions are viewed as deceptive.”<sup>52</sup> More specifically, Woodhouse references two Christian scholars who claim that the use of Persian poetry in the effort to evangelize Iranians can be misleading or suggestive of religious pluralism:

Hendrik Kraemer (1938) allowed for the “dim inklings” of Jesus such poetry may create in the souls of its readers, but remained critical of the suggestion that such texts may facilitate conversion to Christian faith, as those texts are not revealed by God in any sense. To assign to them any epistemological significance is to enter “a marriage of incompatibles . . . [where] divorce is the only natural solution” (Kraemer, 1938: 331). More recently, this concern has been reiterated by missiologists concerned by the use of “points of contact” between religions. Such points are, according to Poston (2010) and others, illusory rather than actual, and

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<sup>51</sup> Luke A. Veronis, “Traditional Methods for Mission and Evangelism,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1997): 525.

<sup>52</sup> Roger S. Greenway, “The Ethics of Evangelism,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (April 1993): 149.

are more suggestive of theological pluralism than of any capacity of non-Christian religion to communicate divine truth.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these cautions, the apostle Paul sets the precedent for the approval of contextualization when he employs pagan poetry for reaching his Athenian audience. In order to proclaim Jesus as the Christ in the city of Athens, Paul quoted these two lines: “For in him we live and move and have our being,” and, “We are his offspring” (Acts 17:28). Concerning this, Woodhouse states, “The lines of Aratus or Epimenides were, from a Christian perspective, doctrinally suspect—yet Paul has selectively deployed their work to ignite the theological imagination of his hearers in service to particular gospel claims.”<sup>54</sup> Using contextualized material entails some risk of misunderstanding, but not to do so risks not being heard at all.

Glenn Fluegge surveys the way in which the first Christians did evangelism. His conclusion is that the model of the early church includes both flexibility and points of rigidity. Fluegge claims that this dual nature of how the church expanded made for its remarkable success and implies that the evangelism of the Christian church today should apply this same genius to its mission. By deemphasizing form while yet insisting upon the centrality and Lordship of Christ, the church today also has great potential for growth.<sup>55</sup> Woodhouse articulates how a delicate process of enculturation can be followed specifically in regard to the use of Persian poetry:

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<sup>53</sup> B. Neil Woodhouse, “‘You are Jesus, and I am Your Bird’: Christ, Persian Poetry, and Theological Imagination in the Iranian Diaspora,” *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 425.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>55</sup> Glenn Fluegge, “The Dual Nature of Evangelism in the Early Church,” *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 305-21.

It is true that religions and their products are not *tabulae rasae*, waiting to be infused with meaning by the well-intentioned Christian. Poston is right to warn that non-Christian religion contains material problematic for missionary efforts; used uncritically, we might risk affirming the poetic Jesus as an adequate, valid alternative to the New Testament. That being said, the spectre of syncretism need not lead us to abdicate on the question of whether the poetry of Iran has missiological utility, quite apart from any agenda of theological harmonization, as Poston (2010) indicates. To maintain this view that non-Christian religious texts do not possess such utility on the grounds that they are religious or considered sacred is to pursue a strong distinction between “culture” (a proper understanding of which has demanded great effort from missiologists) and “religion.”<sup>56</sup>

In summary, God desires Christians to do evangelism contextually. Though care must be taken not to add confusion, to refuse to accommodate words and actions to a specific people’s culture is to deny them the message of the gospel. Love for others requires wise flexibility and adaptation. No greater love was shown than by God himself who became incarnate as a man so that humanity might hear and understand his message of repentance and reconciliation. This was a form of contextualization. Likewise, only by customizing the gospel to a specific audience can Christians accomplish God’s will for them to love their neighbor and to communicate the good news.

### **God Desires Christian Leaders to Equip Christians to Evangelize Well**

The mandate of Jesus given only moments before his ascension to heaven in Matthew’s gospel clearly defines the responsibility of Christian leaders to train other believers in the way of the gospel. An important part of this training and teaching is instruction in doing evangelism well. Evangelism is the first stage of making disciples, which is what Jesus explicitly commands in Mt 28:18-20:

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<sup>56</sup> Woodhouse, 424-25.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

If no evangelism is accomplished, there will be no fulfillment of Jesus’ commission to make disciples of all nations. As Jesus commissioned and sent his disciples into the whole world prior to his ascension to heaven, Christian leaders today are similarly responsible to charge and send disciples to go to all the nations to preach the gospel and nurture the maturation of the baptized. But just as Jesus did not give this directive until he had spent considerable time with those he sent, Christian leaders today are to follow his example by first giving training, teaching, and modeling to believers prior to launching them into new mission fields for the purpose of evangelism and making disciples.

As Jesus did not send his disciples without first preparing them, one might speculate that Christian leaders of the church should not take a different approach. This speculation is confirmed by the pattern found in the New Testament church where Timothy, Titus, and Silas were all substantially trained by Paul prior to their being given independent responsibility. And Paul, himself, did not venture on any of his missionary journeys until after he had had several years of maturation in the context of the Antioch and Jerusalem churches presumably under the instruction of more seasoned believers such as Ananias, Bartholomew, Peter, and James, as well as having had spent considerable time in Arabia to develop and deepen in his Christian faith. So, too, today Christian leaders must intentionally train, teach, and prepare believers for the works of service to which God calls them. One of these works of service is evangelism. In order

for Christians to do evangelism well it is necessary that Christian leadership prepare and train the laity for this ministry.

Christ obligates the leaders of his church to submit to the leadership he gives through his Word in Scripture and his Holy Spirit. This was emphatically clear at the outset of the church's history when Jesus commanded his disciples not to leave Jerusalem until he sent them the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, the apostles received power to be his witnesses as Jesus had promised. Only then was the church capacitated for its mission of proclaiming the gospel locally, regionally, and globally. They were additionally empowered by the Spirit for training the subsequent generations of believers to believe and follow Jesus.

The Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to do miracles, which accompanied the message and helped their listeners to believe that Jesus is the Christ. The power of the Spirit also gave the apostles singular boldness. After the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem told the apostles, Peter and John, to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, the church prayed for boldness despite these threats. God answered their request as Acts 4:31 describes: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Additionally, Luke reports one chapter later in Acts 5:42 that the apostles continued spreading their message despite imprisonment and beatings: "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." After Saul supervised the stoning of Stephen and organized systematic destruction of the Christians in Jerusalem, the church scattered. However, their witnessing and courage to preach did not abate (Acts 8:4, Acts 11:19-20). The final

result was that the church grew as Christ prophesied from a Jewish happening into an international movement.

It behooves leaders in today's church to follow a similar pattern of preaching the Word of Christ through the power given by the Spirit of Christ. Though the specific tools and methods employed varied among the individual apostles and their varying circumstances, the common elements in all New Testament evangelistic encounters were the Word of Christ coupled with the work of his Spirit. Though I taught a particular evangelistic approach, a method of opening with Persian poetry hopefully leading to a substantive, gospel-centered conversation about Jesus, this did not mean that this approach held a primary place alongside of the Word of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Rather, the method of utilizing poetry to begin a conversation was merely one way that God might choose to use to open listeners' ears by the operation of the Spirit to the message of Christ, the Word of God. If there was any opening of ears that occurred it was not due to the power of the poetry or the technique I suggested. Rather, the Holy Spirit remained the only one who could enable evangelists to speak at all and, moreover, to speak boldly. And it was only the Holy Spirit who could open the ears of listeners actually to hear and understand so that they might chose to repent and believe the good news of God's offer of love and salvation.

Because of the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the evangelistic encounter Brian DeVries identifies the moment of Christian witness as not a dialogue between the evangelist and the non-believer, but rather as a "trialogue" because the Holy Spirit also is present and actively involved. DeVries explains that it is the Holy Spirit who gives competency to the believer in her or his evangelistic testimony as well as lending

understanding to the unbeliever, that is, if God has determined to bring that person to faith in his Son.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not I specifically utilized DeVries' term, my training of evangelists certainly included the content of what DeVries articulates. Scripture gives abundant evidence that authentic evangelism always includes the presence and work of the Spirit alongside of the Christian believer who speaks the Word of God. This was important to teach for the sake of comforting the evangelists that I trained, namely, that God accompanies them in their difficult task to proclaim the gospel to an unknown and sometimes hostile audience. Secondly, it was important to remind my participants that the outcome of their evangelistic encounter was not, finally, their responsibility. If God did not regenerate the listener's heart and the unbeliever refused to repent in rebellion against the truth, the responsibility would not be borne by the evangelists. Christ's ambassadors must know that the listener is finally in God's hands, but that they have fulfilled their commission by testifying.

Notwithstanding the indescribably important operation of the Spirit emboldening the evangelist and regenerating the unrepentant, particular approaches and means can be beneficially learned and exploited by believers for doing evangelism. Over the decades, church leaders have taught their congregations different ways of sharing the gospel. In Western countries, some of these methods have included Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws and the two questions of D. James Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion. Congregations or small groups of churches have used Nicky Gumbel's program, Alpha. Diagrams have included the drawing of a chasm of sin first separating God from people

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<sup>57</sup> Brian A. DeVries, "The Evangelistic Trialogue: Gospel Communication with the Holy Spirit," *Calvin Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (April 2009): 49-73.

and then bridged by the cross on which Jesus died, through which humans can access God. Another method of communicating the gospel is called The Roman Road and involves a series of Scripture texts all from Paul's epistle to the Romans, which present humanity's problem of sin and the solution for it that God gives through Christ.

Mark Keown endorses the equipping of believers for the purpose of gospel proclamation. In his research in the Pauline corpus as well as in his study of Acts, Keown demonstrates a biblical precedent for today's church leaders to train and send other believers of the body for the work of evangelism.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Scripture teaches that Christ's purpose for placing leaders within the church is for preparing others for ministry. In Eph 4:11-12, Paul writes, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." Those in designated offices and endowed with specific gifts are responsible to equip other believers for the successful accomplishment of Christ's call to them.

One example of the equipping that leaders within the church must do is to prepare God's people for evangelism. Leaders of Christ's church are responsible to train and teach what is necessary for believers to be successful in the commission that the Lord assigned to his disciples prior to his ascension. The implementation of the purpose of this project, training Iranian believers to do evangelism among Iranians nonbelievers using the poetry of their own classical poets, is one instance of what is God's will for church leaders to do. Depending on the help of the Spirit, I equipped the saints of one particular

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<sup>58</sup> Mark J. Keown, "Congregational Evangelism in Paul: The Paul of Acts," *Colloquium* 42, no. 2 (November 2010): 231-51.



time and locale of God's universal church through biblically and theologically sound evangelism training. By the teaching and training I offered, these believers were better prepared for one particular work of service, namely, God's mission to announce the gospel to all nations.

## CHAPTER 4

### THEORETICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

#### **Effective Cross-Cultural Interaction Requires Multicultural Communication**

Jim Found writes about an example of failure in multicultural communication among missionaries in India speaking to those of a Hindu background. He recalls, “A listener in India... had to explain to an evangelist why people were not responding to his call to be ‘born again.’ He said, ‘That is the very thing we are trying to avoid.’”<sup>59</sup> If the missionaries had more carefully considered how to approach those who believe in reincarnation and so had reframed their message of spiritual rebirth, this misunderstanding may have been avoided. The story illustrates the importance of multicultural communication for effective cross-cultural interaction. David Peter argues that Christians need to be open to the truth that social science offers and employ its discoveries and principles specifically for Kingdom purposes. The sovereign grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the unregenerate does not supplant the useful relevancy in evangelism of the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The vertical dimension of God’s sovereign grace must be joined with the horizontal dimension of civilization’s discoveries for a balanced

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<sup>59</sup> Jim Found, “Teaching Cross-Cultural Evangelism,” *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 2 (November 2015): 259.

approached toward gospel proclamation that utilizes both special and general revelation.<sup>60</sup>

Cross-cultural communication is perpetually difficult. Mary Hinchcliff-Pelias and Norman Greer study cross-cultural interactions within the context of international students and their host families. Tragically, they discovered that in many cases the international students had very infrequent contact with the families with whom they lived. Language and cultural barriers were simply too great for relationships to develop well. The interviewed students' statements are a sobering chronicle of the enduring biases and prejudices that plague intercultural encounters.<sup>61</sup> Yuanying Liang and Robert Jecklin report similar findings in business. Even within the context of a single organization, failed communication due to language and cultural differences led to significant levels of stress for both employees and managers within that organization. These cultural barriers are not insurmountable, the authors claimed, but only if everyone involved is committed to the process in order to remain patient and constantly deal with the translation of culture and language.<sup>62</sup> Jain Sachin names seven categories that require competency if intercultural communication is to succeed: "Display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behavior, interaction management,

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<sup>60</sup> David J. Peter, "A Framework for the Practice of Evangelism and Congregational Outreach," *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004): 203-16.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Hinchcliff-Pelias and Norman S. Greer, "The Importance of Intercultural Communication in International Education," *International Education* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 5-18.

<sup>62</sup> Yuanying Liang and Robert Jecklin, "Stress and Communication across Cultural Boundaries in the U.S. Location of a Chinese Business," *Global Journal of Health and Education Promotion* 15, no. 1 (July 2012): 120-33.

and tolerance for ambiguity.”<sup>63</sup> These seven categories are important for consideration and evaluation whenever one engages in cross-cultural communication.

Another key aspect that Westerners often misunderstand when communicating among people of the Majority world is the cultural framework of honor and shame rather than the bent of Western culture to view interpersonal interactions in terms of guilt and innocence. Ziya Meral explores this point when discussing the formulation of a theology that is specific to the Middle East. Salvation for those of an honor-shame heart frame, the author argues, will need to be presented as the offer of hope and restored honor for humanity.<sup>64</sup> In connection with this more Middle Eastern construct of salvation, Alex Toorman urges Christians who evangelize among honor and shame cultures to be sensitive to how they present the gospel. Less emphasis should be given to justification, including guilt and redemption, than to propitiation, which means the restoration of our honor when God can abandon his wrath because his honor has been restored. In such cultures, the salvation event may be presented best as being primarily a transference from shame to honor.<sup>65</sup>

Tom Steffen argues that evangelists to particular cultures should be sensitive and

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<sup>63</sup> Jain Sachin, “Experiential Training for Enhancing Intercultural Sensitivity,” *Journal of Cultural Diversity* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 15.

<sup>64</sup> Ziya Meral, “Toward a Relevant Theology for the Middle East,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 2005), accessed August 28, 2017, <https://emqonline.com/node/1835>.

<sup>65</sup> Alex Toorman, “Selfless Love: The Missing Middle in Honor/Shame Cultures,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (April 2011): 160-67.

aware of even the names they use for God.<sup>66</sup> This is certainly true for an initial meeting of an Iranian person who is likely to be of a Muslim background. Why should the evangelist create animosity when the conversation only has begun? For example, starting the first sentence with a claim for the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God may be true, but is it wise when many Muslims misunderstand this to imply necessarily that God had sexual relations with a human in order to produce offspring. Awareness of the potential pitfalls of misconstrued meaning when communicating cross-culturally is critical for successful multicultural interaction.

From the field of education, Tasha Wyatt concurs with the effectiveness of customizing an attempt to communicate new information in a culturally specific way. In most classrooms this is complicated to implement since multiple, diverse cultures are represented. However, for the application of personal evangelism to a targeted nationality, specificity in the approach is possible. Wyatt writes:

The notion that teachers must know their students and subsequently use this knowledge to design instruction pervades the literature on teaching culturally and linguistically diverse groups. This strategy is known as *contextualization*... Research has shown that teachers who are knowledgeable about their students' family lives are better prepared to understand children's in-school behavior (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). They are also better equipped to systematically tie students' interests, concerns, and strengths with instruction, which in turn strengthens student motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1994).<sup>67</sup>

The parallel between teaching new information in a classroom and communication of the gospel is readily apparent. The importance for sensitivity and awareness on the part of the

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<sup>66</sup> Tom Steffen, "Minimizing Crosscultural Evangelism Noise," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 4 (October 2015): 413-28.

<sup>67</sup> Tasha Wyatt, "Understanding the Process of Contextualization," *Multicultural Learning and Teaching* 10, no. 1 (2015): 112.

speaker in either activity is critical so that both the students in the classroom and the audience of the evangelist will hear and understand. One advantage for evangelism over the context of the classroom, however, is that the evangelist is able usually to customize her or his communication to only one specific culture.

An Iranian Christian's evangelization of an Iranian non-believer appears to be an instance of two people speaking with a common culture. However, as Lily A. Arasaratnam demonstrates, cross-cultural communication is not always speech that crosses barriers of ethnicity or race, but rather is what crosses the lines between reified thought communities.<sup>68</sup> Intercultural competency includes mindfulness of these multiple thought-fields underlying all communication. Proper training of evangelists of any cultural background should include the introduction to these concepts as well as awareness of and sensitivity toward the thought communities that will be encountered. For Christian Iranians meeting Iranians of a Muslim or secular adherence in Greater Vancouver, culturally appropriate approaches that take account of religious differences were necessary for the communication across these reified thought communities to be effective. Additionally, as I sought to equip and train the Iranian believers with methods and material for presenting the gospel to Iranian strangers, I remained aware of the cultural dynamics and peculiarities held by the audience we were seeking to reach. Only through such careful methods of multicultural communication were we able to accomplish successfully the inter-cultural interaction that this project proposed.

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<sup>68</sup> Lily A. Arasaratnam, "Intercultural Spaces and Communication Within: An Explication," *Australian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 3 (2012): 135-141.

## Improved Communication Skills Aid Evangelism

“Smokers like matches that light with the first strike, and listeners like presentations that ignite their interest immediately.”<sup>69</sup> This is the advice of Sims Wyeth, and Karen Susman agrees. More specifically, she suggests, “Start with a pertinent, dramatic statistic, quote, anecdote or rhetorical question.”<sup>70</sup> Both Wyeth and Susman claim that beginning well is critical to the final outcome of a communicator’s chance of success with his or her listeners. An assertion similar to these about public speaking could be made about evangelism. In sharing the gospel among Iranians living in diaspora, the conversation’s opening is critical. A potentially attractive introductory topic that would both catch the attention and warm the heart of an Iranian listener is Persian poetry. If not used at the immediate outset of the conversation, Persian poetry could be included within the first few of sentences of conversation. Using lines of poetry could be an important component of improved communication between the evangelist and the listener, functioning to significantly aid the evangelistic purpose.

Though the common conception among Westerners is that Iranians are radical Islamists, the opposite is actually true. Many Iranians are disillusioned with Islam because they are disillusioned with their Islamist government, which they believe has largely failed them. Mark Bradley makes this link between people’s disdain for the government of Iran and Islam when describing the religious climate of the country. He

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<sup>69</sup> Sims Wyeth, *The Essentials of Persuasive Public Speaking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 104.

<sup>70</sup> Karen Susman, “Six Key Indicators Guaranteed to Reduce Audience Stress and Increase Your Applause,” *ARMA Records Management Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (July 1997): 20.

writes, “This recent history concerns a deep disillusionment of Islam that has developed in Iran. For many Iranians... their relationship with their national religion was first wounded, and then infected.”<sup>71</sup> Woodhouse agrees when he states,

Common to many of these reasons is a shared frustration with the regime and, by extension, with Islam, such that many Iranians seek to create together new spaces of belonging in their diasporic environment which are distinctly Persian and unmarked by Islam and its motifs.<sup>72</sup>

This is why an evangelistic approach such as mentioning the claims made about Jesus from the Qur’an may not be useful among Iranians. Connecting any topic to Islam is potentially inflammatory for an Iranian due to this “infection” and “frustration” commonly found festering in the hearts of the Persian populace today.

However, if we follow the advice of Wyeth and Susman quoted above and start an evangelistic conversation with a reference or quotation, the poetry of Iran may successfully serve as a non-threatening and helpful introductory topic. Persian poetry naturally bridges the gap between Iranian culture and the Christian gospel since the classical Persian poets speak frequently and respectfully about Jesus Christ. Introducing the gospel in this way potentially will increase the rate of initial receptivity of the evangelist as well as subsequent, substantive engagement with the essence of her or his message, namely, the Christian gospel.

The thirteenth century classical, Persian poet, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, whom Iranians refer to as “Molana,” which means “master,” is today one of the most

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Bradley, *Too Many To Jail: The Story of Iran’s New Christians* (Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2014), 38.

<sup>72</sup> B. Neil Woodhouse, “‘You are Jesus, and I am Your Bird’: Christ, Persian Poetry, and Theological Imagination in the Iranian Diaspora,” *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 417.



famous poets among Iranians and Westerners, too. Through his amplified spirituality and energized metaphors, Rumi often threatens to break the parameters of orthodox Islam. And, at first glance, the reader may think that he has done so. However, after a more careful and thorough examination, one realizes that Rumi and other classical Persian poets never actually abandon Islam's fundamental tenants. In light of how Western culture has popularized Rumi, Amira El-Zein soberly recalls Rumi's roots in Islam and his pervasive allusions to, and even quotations of the Qur'an in all of his poetry. Unlike the "new Sufism" ascending in America, which is rootless and more akin to New Age religion, Rumi's centering point remains Islam despite his frequent flights into mysticism.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, the degrees of separation that the classical Persian poets achieve from the most rigid forms of Islam allow them to think and write more freely. In Rumi's numerous references to Jesus Christ, this leeway permits him to introduce the Messiah with singular respect and praise—adulation that is afforded to no else, including even the prophet of Islam. James R. King observes, however, that Rumi exalts Jesus to a no higher place than that of an intermediate status between God and humanity. Jesus is therefore highly exalted, but not wholly distinct from other great prophets and holy men. Rather, along with a select set of individuals, Jesus is presented as the greatest of all human beings—a sort of superhero, what King identifies as the "perfect man." He writes:

So we can say that for Rumi, Jesus stood at the center of the human creative process and became part of his most extravagant, most poetic, most meaningful store of images. Rumi carries the meaning of Jesus well beyond what we would normally identify as Islamic norms, well beyond what might be required of a prophet, identifying him as one of a very rare body of individuals qualitatively

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<sup>73</sup> Amira El-Zein, "Spiritual Consumption in the United States: The Rumi Phenomenon," *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations* 11, no. 1 (March 2000): 71-85.

different from normal human beings and endowed with a special capacity to renew and transform human lives, to render them whole and complete, but without ever going beyond the Islamic insistence that there is no god but God.<sup>74</sup>

Elsewhere King makes a similar assertion about Rumi's view of Jesus: "The intent seems to be to suggest that Jesus was an absolutely extraordinary individual, though not to find this extraordinariness in any genetic ties with God."<sup>75</sup> According to King, Rumi views Jesus as one of the few instances in history of the "perfect man." But this does not categorize Jesus in the same way in which orthodox Christianity does, namely, asserting that Jesus is divine. King, in fact, suggests that Rumi probably viewed the Old Testament character, Joseph, as a more quintessential "perfect man" than even Jesus.<sup>76</sup> But whether or not that is true, the point remains that for Rumi Jesus is only one of a limited number of great prophets and special individuals who compose this set of elite figures and not one who is altogether unique.

The "perfect man" concept is not inconsistent with Islam, which does not have the Christian doctrine of humanity's total depravity, which began with Adam and Eve's fall into sin and continues to this day with every person born with that corruption inherited from the first parents. Islam, rather, asserts that every child born into this world comes lacking essential moral distortion. Therefore, select individuals such as Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, and Muhammad, for their entire lives can manage to avoid doing any sin whatsoever. For Rumi, Jesus was one of the greatest examples of this special group.

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<sup>74</sup> James R. King, "Jesus and Joseph in Rumi's Mathnawi," *The Muslim World* 80, no. 2 (April 1990): 89-90.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 91.

B. Neil Woodhouse agrees with King in cautioning against viewing Rumi's praise for Jesus as pseudo-Christianity. He asserts that Iranian Christian leader, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, overreaches in his claims about the Persian poets, Rumi included. He writes:

Of course, one must take care not to overread this coherence as evidence of latent Christian beliefs among the poets, as Dehqāni-Taftī (1990) has proposed. Space prevents us from reckoning with the poets' countertestimony against Christians, and while there is evidence of individual poets encountering Christian communities and their beliefs (Bausani, 2000), even Rūmī ridicules them for their belief in a "Lord who was suspended" (M III:2581, 2013: 158). We ought also to acknowledge that the poems themselves depart from the New Testament picture on several points—the poetic Jesus remains entirely human (albeit a human who has achieved absorption into the divine essence; King, 1990), and his disputes with the fool allude to an interiorized gnosis selectively revealed through detachment from the world. If it does receive any mention, the crucifixion narrative is emptied of redemptive significance, other than perhaps becoming a symbol of purification of the soul through mortification of the body (Schimmel, 1975; Soroudi, 1979). If there is a nearness to the biblical horizon here, there is also an undeniable distance.<sup>77</sup>

The classical poets do appear to be a step closer to the doctrines of the New Testament than is orthodox Islam. This may have been anticipated since Woodhouse reports that "both the Qur'ān (Q26:224) and sunnah warn that poets will invariably lead the faithful Muslim into error."<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Persian classical poetry still roots itself in the fundamental tenants of the Qur'an. Rumi may function as a transition point for seekers from Islam to Christianity; but for teaching Christian faith, his usefulness falters. It is appropriate that one Iranian church inscribed lines of Rumi above their entryway into the church, but not inside the building on the walls of their worship spaces. Woodhouse

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<sup>77</sup> Woodhouse, 424.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 419.

relates the balanced position necessary for a proper categorization of classical Persian poetry:

This rich body of texts is not only widely loved and appreciated by Iranians as *objets d'art*, but continues to exert influence upon the Iranian theological imagination through its revelation of divine wisdom in metaphor, symbol, and allegory (Ziai, 2009). And, strikingly enough, a lively awareness of Jesus as a source of blessing and guidance exists within this literature.<sup>79</sup>

The choice, therefore, to be prepared with lines of Persian poetry when approaching an Iranian stranger for use either at the outset or soon after a conversation has begun is potentially highly beneficial. Though Iranians are among the most skilled ethnicity of the Middle East to display a façade of accepting a Western lifestyle and values, their hearts remain culturally Persian. Nilou Mostofi documents how Iranians in diaspora typically ascend economically by presenting a “white” public image. Nevertheless, in their private worlds they allow themselves to be culturally Middle Eastern.<sup>80</sup> To successfully communicate the message of Jesus and the gospel, not the façade but the hearts of Iranians must be encountered. This requires a significant amount of heightened cultural and interpersonal sensitivity because assumptions lying behind one’s own culture likely may not be true of the values and presuppositions that lie beneath the other individual’s culture. Shadi Sahami Martin discovered this discrepancy when interviewing Iranian elderly persons living in diaspora. She encountered cultural misunderstanding in every age category but discovered even more discrepancy for older persons. There exists a negative relationship between successful acculturation to one’s

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<sup>79</sup> Woodhouse, 417.

<sup>80</sup> Nilou Mostofi, “Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity,” *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 681-703.

host country and one's age upon immigration.<sup>81</sup> So, even more awareness and sensitivity on the part of evangelists must be shown toward Iranians who are elderly. Thankfully, for these same elderly Iranians, in contrast to those from a younger generation, lines of Persian poetry likely will be received readily and viewed as offers of friendship and connection.

Improved communication skills aid evangelism. Though many factors must align to create a successful evangelism encounter, one critical component is connecting the heart of the listener to what is probably viewed as a foreign message. Using lines from Rumi can introduce a discussion about Jesus in a way that is neither Western, nor Islamic, nor Christian, but distinctly Iranian. This method potentially can be a brilliant communication method that is highly beneficial to the Christian's mission of calling non-believing Iranians to reconsider the true identity of and their need for the Messiah.

### **Teaching and Training Enhance Believers in Evangelizing**

An example of teaching and training for evangelism that Christians may appropriately study for potential application is the approach that Jesus employed. To begin, Jesus gave his disciples his own model of doing what he expected them to do. For many days, he showed them what to do by doing it himself (Lk 5-8). Secondly, before sending the twelve disciples to go out to preach the Kingdom and demonstrate its signs, Jesus also gave them verbal instructions (Lk 9:3-5). Afterwards, the twelve disciples regrouped with Jesus and saw more of his example for how to announce the Kingdom of

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<sup>81</sup> Shadi Sahami Martin, "Illness of the Mind or Illness of the Spirit? Mental Health-Related Conceptualization and Practices of Older Iranian Immigrants," *Health & Social Work* 34, no. 2 (May 2009): 117-26.

God. Eventually, Jesus also sent seventy-two of his disciples to go before him into the villages. These disciples had also seen Jesus doing what he now verbally commissioned them to do. In his commission of the twelve and the seventy-two disciples, Jesus employed a dual nature of instruction, which included both modeling and verbal direction. This may be suggestive of what also today constitutes effective preparation for heralds of the good news. The teaching is oral instruction while the training consists of modeling and practice. In my three classroom sessions prior to going with the participants to the public marketplace, I used both teaching and training to prepare a selected group of Iranian Christians to evangelize effectively. From several related fields that depend on person-to-person communication, evidence mounts that teaching and training leads to greater communication success.

The first related field is medicine. Medical practitioners must convey information to their patients and do so with varying degrees of effectiveness, at least in part dependent upon how much communication training they have received. Friedrich Stiefel, Celine Bourquin, Carine Layat, Sara Vadot, Raphael Bonvin, and other researchers found that individualized training and role-play practice with feedback aided medical practitioners to more successfully and sensitively transfer information to patients. They wrote, “Active involvement through simulated patient interview seems required for students to feel able to reach training objectives.”<sup>82</sup> The “simulated patient interview” was the training for medical practitioners that improved their overall effectiveness in communicating information to patients.

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<sup>82</sup> Friedrich Stiefel, Celine Bourquin, Carine Layat, Sara Vadot, Raphael Bonvin, et al., “Medical Students’ Skills and Needs for Training in Breaking Bad News,” *Journal of Cancer Education* 28, no. 1 (March 2013): 187.

In a field distinct from medicine but also involving person-to-person communication, sales effectiveness in selling sport tickets, Nels Popp, Jason Simmons, and Chad McEvoy determined that the ability to sell tickets directly correlated to the amount of sales training the vendor had received. They wrote, “It should be noted that among low-achieving sellers, 62.9% received fewer than two hours a month of on-going training, while among high-achieving sellers, only 38.9% reported receiving fewer than two hours of training per month.”<sup>83</sup> The study additionally showed how in the beginning, midway, and at the ending of the sales conversation untrained sellers would not be able to respond well to potential buyers. The authors noted, “It is unlikely, for example, sales representatives will excel at opening a conversation, closing a sale, or adapting to objections posed by consumers without proper training.”<sup>84</sup> This study concluded:

More effective sales training leads to greater sales success and efficiency; desirable performance outcomes aligned with the fourth and final stage of Kirkpatrick's (1994) sales training evaluation model. As previously noted, it can be difficult at times to tease out the true effect of sales training on performance outcomes due to potentially confounding external variables also influencing customer purchase decisions (Attia et al., 2013); however, this was the relationship the current study sought to assess.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the difficulty of eliminating variables in order to fairly assess the importance of training, the authors did demonstrate a correlation between training and sales success.

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<sup>83</sup> Nels Popp, Jason Simmons, and Chad McEvoy, “Sport Ticket Sales Training: Perceived Effectiveness and Impact on Ticket Sales Results,” *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 2017): 105, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1931960716/fulltextPDF/1160080175BC45AFPQ/2?accountid=33215>.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 106.

Therefore, although this study was not able to definitively link sales education to every measurement of sales success, it did conclude that instruction was important and that increased hours of training is linked to better sales results.

A similar study of real estate agents also discovered a direct correlation between the training they received and their effectiveness at achieving sales. The business of property sales involves person-to-person communication events that depend considerably on the capability of an individual to speak persuasively and respond appropriately to another individual, much like the evangelism encounters this project proposes. Charles Pettijohn, Linda Pettijohn, and Stephen Parker concluded that training for real estate agents was important for achieving sales goals. They did not find a correlating relationship between all measurements of sales success and training, but they identified possible reasons in some categories for that absence. These include training, which did not meet a “threshold level” of effectiveness thereby producing no measurable benefit, and, secondly, training not being given in the most critical category, namely, consumer-need identification. Their conclusion, however, still did endorse the usefulness and need for training of real estate agents and gave five specific recommendations in that regard.<sup>86</sup>

Barton Weitz, Harish Sujan, and Mita Sujan, identify “personal selling” as an encounter between a seller and buyer in which the seller can customize the sales message to the most specific degree possible. Again, this concept comes from a secular discipline. Yet, the concepts of “personal selling” overlap significantly with an evangelistic

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<sup>86</sup> Charles E. Pettijohn, Linda S. Pettijohn, and R. Stephen Parker, “Real Estate Sales Training: Purposes, Topics and Effectiveness,” *Review of Business* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 31-35, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/220921110/fulltextPDF/1160080175BC45AFPQ/3?accountid=33215>.



conversation that a Christian may initiate with one to whom he or she wishes to communicate the gospel. The authors make this observation about the training required for improved results in personal selling:

Personal selling is the only communication vehicle in which the marketing message can be adapted to the specific customer's needs and beliefs. Salespeople have the opportunity to do 'market research' on each customer and implement a sales presentation that is maximally effective for that customer. In addition, they can observe the reactions of their customers to sales messages and make rapid adjustments (Weitz and Wright 1978).<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, evangelism is most often a person-specific encounter. In the training that I gave to the project participants, I did not use the term "personal selling," but the concept was present. For example, though I did not use the terminology of "adaptive selling," I encouraged my evangelists in similar principles: willingness to adjust one's presentation, being sensitive to one's audience, and responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I taught the principles of effective selling techniques because both successful sales personal and good evangelists will observe the verbal or non-verbal cues coming from their audience and adjust their presentation as needed.<sup>88</sup> As Christians, we believe that beyond the human speaker and human listener, there is also a third party involved. God, the Holy Spirit will prompt the evangelist to take the conversation in certain directions and will call with the gospel in the heart of the individual who is hearing Christ proclaimed. The authors offer a helpful definition of "adaptive selling:"

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<sup>87</sup> Barton A. Weitz, Harish Sujana, and Mita Sugan, "Knowledge, Motivation, and Adaptive Behavior: A Framework for Improving Selling Effectiveness," *Journal of Marketing* 50, no. 4 (October 1986): 174, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/227818292/fulltextPDF/1160080175BC45AFPQ/5?accountid=33215>.

<sup>88</sup> Mike Clayton, "How to Speak so People Listen," *Training Journal* (December 2013): 37-41, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1469704142/fulltextPDF/F05199770D6842C3PQ/1?accountid=33215>.

The practice of adaptive selling is defined as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation. An extreme example of *non*-adaptive selling is delivering the same “canned” presentation (Jolson 1975) to all customers. In contrast, salespeople are extremely adaptive when they use unique sales presentations for each customer and also alter their behavior during an interaction.<sup>89</sup>

Like a good sales manager, I strongly discouraged my evangelists from inflexibility. I taught that a good evangelist, like a goods salesperson, must be ready to abandon the standard script and compose a completely new one or at least have the readiness to adjust the rehearsed lines. In my training, I taught concepts similar to “adaptive selling,” though with distinctively Christian terminology.

In a field that is more closely related to evangelism than is sales, namely, Christian missionary training, the Moravians serve as an exemplary model. Robert L. Gallagher points out the centrality of prayer and fervent piety at the center of all Moravian mission training. Their leader, Count Zinzendorf, believed that no amount of technical or methodological skill could substitute for “heart-religion.” Nevertheless, the school included months of biblical and methodological instruction as well.<sup>90</sup> Their example anecdotally demonstrates the importance of teaching and training in the process of preparing believers to proclaim the gospel.

Examples in Scripture also endorse the validity and importance of teaching and training in preparation for evangelism. This is not only supported by the strong example of Jesus with his disciples but also by the apostle Paul. Not only did Paul constantly pour

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<sup>89</sup> Weitz, Sujana, and Sugan, 175.

<sup>90</sup> Robert L. Gallagher, “Zinzendorf and the Early Moravians: Pioneers in Leadership Selection and Training,” *Missiology* 36, no. 2 (April 2, 2008): 237-44.

himself into the lives of his companions such as Silas, Timothy, and Epaphras; but also he instructed other Christians to do likewise. More than only theology, Scriptural interpretation, and prayer; Paul offered his disciples his own example of fervent evangelism. That all of this was to be passed onto others was strongly modeled and explicitly stated. In his last extant letter, Paul writes to Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tm 2:2). What “things” Timothy heard Paul say can be inferred from Paul’s sermons and dialogue that Luke records in Acts as well as from the content of Paul’s epistles to the churches. Paul cared deeply about evangelism and trained and motivated others to have a similar passion. Veronis summarizes the critical nature of this training component:

From the beginning of one’s ministry, the missionary has to seek out interested believers who will take the reins of leadership as soon as possible. Saint Paul’s words to his disciple Timothy offer wisdom to the missionary, “What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2 Tim 2.2). Too often, this task proves very difficult for missionaries. As foreigners, missionaries frequently foster an unhealthy paternal love which hinders their spiritual children from growing up.<sup>91</sup>

Though Veronis is referring to the broader task of the church’s mission, a critical piece of this responsibility is the work of evangelism. The skill and responsibility for witnessing to others must be taught, modeled, and passed on.

Some Christians have argued that no training or teaching of evangelism is actually required or helpful for its implementation. In his examination of the history of missionary

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<sup>91</sup> Luke A. Veronis, “Traditional Methods for Mission and Evangelism,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1997): 525.

training among the Churches of Christ in the United States, Henderson cites this belief, which commonly existed:

At the time churches of Christ began foreign mission work, brotherhood public opinion was strong to assert that no advanced preparation was needed: the way to learn to do mission work was to do it.<sup>92</sup>

This disdain for training was held specifically in reference to the task of foreign missions. If such an attitude reigned about preparation for mission done in a foreign country and culture, how much more would be dismissed the need for training for preaching the gospel locally and among a people whose culture may be better known and understood? Against this sentiment that some people have held, Alan Henderson asserts that training of missionaries is very necessary:

Good stewardship of time and resources demands that the church thoroughly train her missionaries and ensure that they receive adequate preparation. Wise selection and proper training of missionary candidates are essential to the effectiveness of the modern mission enterprise among Churches of Christ.<sup>93</sup>

The task of full-time, cross-cultural missions is distinct from the calling of the local evangelist. Yet, the overlap between the two ministries is substantial. If training for the missionary is critical, then teaching and training for the lay member in the local church for doing evangelism is also essential to the prospect of the church having an effective witness to its community.

Lewis A. Drummond discovered through his examination of The Southern Baptist Church's membership records that, in fact, this is true. He identified a correlation between intentional evangelism training within the churches and an increase in the

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<sup>92</sup> Alan Henderson, "A Historical Review of Missions and Missionary Training in the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1993): 208.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

church's membership. Using curriculum contained in the booklet entitled, *The Southern Baptist Plan of Evangelism*, many of the Southern Baptist churches studied and practiced evangelism. Drummond writes:

Matthews' book, *The Southern Baptist Plan of Evangelism* (1949), became a virtual classic, and the churches responded. Baptisms increased from 256,699 in 1945 to 416,867 in 1955. During that decade Baptist churches grew four times faster than the general population. It was akin to a spiritual awakening in itself.<sup>94</sup>

Teaching and training also enhance believers in the work of evangelism because people can be trained with better skills for interacting with those of a different culture or religious faith. Jain Sachin demonstrated that individuals can be made more sensitive to, and aware of cross-cultural dynamics.<sup>95</sup> Using movies, group discussion, and interaction with an individual representing a particular cultural group, Sachin showed that people can be taught to develop sensitivity to intercultural issues. One hundred years prior to Sachin's study, the global missions convention held in Edinburgh, Scotland made a similar claim when they insisted on better training for missionaries in regards to intercultural sensitivity. Behind that call was the assumption that such training is helpful and effective:

It is, therefore, clear that the missionary needs to know far more than the mere manners and customs of the race to which he is sent; he ought to be versed in the genius of the people, that which has made them the people they are; and to sympathise so truly with the good which they have evolved, that he may be able to aid the national leaders reverently to build up a Christian civilization after their own kind, not after the European kind.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Lewis A. Drummond, "Training for Evangelism in Southern Baptist Life," *Baptist History and Heritage* 22, no. 1 (January 1987): 30.

<sup>95</sup> Jain Sachin, "Experiential Training for Enhancing Intercultural Sensitivity," *Journal of Cultural Diversity* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 15-20.

<sup>96</sup> Darrell L. Whiteman, "Integral Training Today for Cross-Cultural Mission," *Missiology: An International Review* 36, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 6.

The teaching and training that I gave to the project participants enhanced their sensitivity toward the audience we sought to reach. The data of Drummond and Sachin demonstrates that instruction can effectively accomplish these goals.

In conclusion, teaching and training enhance believers for doing evangelism. Though there have been dissenting voices arguing against the importance of preparation for evangelists, the theoretical literature strongly suggests otherwise. From diverse fields such as medicine, real estate and sports ticket sales, there emerges a consensus that training strengthens the individuals who need to speak in sensitive or persuasive ways to others. Evangelists encounter people on the sensitive and controversial topic of religious commitment. Therefore, I began my project with requiring participants to attend three sessions of teaching and training prior to my leading them into the marketplace to implement what they learned. This preparation was critical for the participants' courage, capability, and success.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROJECT PLANS AND OBJECTIVES

Specific objectives for the participants and myself were categorized as:

1) cognitive, which pertains to obtaining new information or insight; 2) affective, which pertains to attitudes, values, and motivation; or 3) skills, which has to do with performance or demonstration of ability. The objectives focused on demonstrable change as seen in outcomes reported in the project.

#### **Objectives for Participants**

There were three specific objectives with measurable criteria for the project participants:

First, as a cognitive objective the Iranian Christian evangelists would evidence sensitivity toward the stranger's culture by:

- a. Demonstrating knowledge of the dynamics of multicultural communication
- b. Evidencing awareness of the culture of Iran and Shia Islam
- c. Becoming aware of how the Persian poet, Rumi, in his poem, *Masnavi*, presents Jesus

Second, as an affective objective the Iranian Christians would evidence greater eagerness for doing evangelism by:

- a. Demonstrating compassion for others' estrangement from God
- b. Engaging actively in gospel-related conversations
- c. Sharing the personal depth of one's salvation experience during evangelism

Third, as a skill-related objective the Iranian Christians would demonstrate competency in evangelizing Iranian strangers through the use of Persian poetry by:

- a. Evidencing the ability to initiate conversation with Iranian strangers
- b. Indicating the ability to present and discuss the lines, which exalt Jesus, of the poet, Rumi
- c. Showing the capacity for transitioning from a discussion of Persian poetry to sharing the gospel

### **Personal Objectives for the Project**

I had a cognitive and a skill-oriented personal objective to accomplish by the conclusion of this project:

First, I would become conversant with the issues within multicultural communication in particular reference to Persian culture by:

- a. Understanding the dynamics unique to cross-cultural communication
- b. Becoming aware of how Persians respond to strangers
- c. Familiarizing myself with the life and times of the poet, Rumi, beloved by Persians, and memorizing selected lines of his poem, *Masnavi*, in Farsi

Second, I would demonstrate competency in training Iranian Christians to use lines of poetry for the purpose of introducing the gospel by:

- a. Facilitating a set of classes that included teaching about Persian cultural sensitivity, including awareness of the poet, Rumi
- b. Training the Iranian Christians in sharing their own testimony and the basic gospel message
- c. Offering opportunities for the Iranian Christians to practice evangelism through the method of role-play
- d. Facilitating the Iranian Christians to go to public places where they would use Persian poetry in evangelism



## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

I began preparing for my research project at Faith International University with the first course specifically pertaining to the matter, AT8563 Research Design & Statistics, in the Spring quarter of 2017. In that and the following quarter, I tentatively proposed my project of training Iranian Christians of Nejat Church of Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada, even though at that time I was residing in Seattle, Washington. We were able to move our residence from Seattle to Port Coquitlam, a city adjacent to Coquitlam, British Columbia in September 2017. In the following months, I continued the preparations for my research project while working in Canada. By December, I was ready to realize the plans of the project among the members of the congregation whom I had begun serving as pastor since my move to Canada.

The project's implementation formally began December 30, 2017 and January 6, 2018, when I announced at the conclusion of Nejat Church's worship services that I would be offering a series of evangelism classes and trainings. I decided to make this announcement to the entire congregation rather than selectively recruit individuals of the church body in order to avoid any perception on my part of favoritism of anyone in the congregation. This had the advantage of gathering a large group for the start of the project. However, this method of broad invitation resulted in significant attrition occurring through the course of the project by individuals who had not carefully considered the exact nature of the project, especially going into the community to speak

with Iranian strangers, as well as the total time commitment involved. The first of two changes I would make if I were to do the research again would be to hold an information meeting prior to the project's implementation so that people would be fully informed about what the project is prior to beginning any participation in the research. Second, in the first session of the project itself, I would have participants sign a statement of intent to complete the entire project. In these ways the amount of attrition occurring through the course of the project's implementation might be lessened.

A large group of more than a dozen people attended the project's informational meeting occurring after the worship service on Saturday, January 6. I disclosed the purpose of my project and the connection it had with my studies at Faith International University and distributed the informed consent documents, which the majority of people accepted and signed. There was significant suspicion at my request for signatures on the informed consent documents and noticeable hesitation concerning the permission for audio and video recordings to be taken. I had anticipated this reaction since Iranians come from a very repressive and punishing cultural and political context, in which "anything can and will be held against you." Thankfully, my rapport with this congregation had been building for two years, since I had routinely travelled from our home in the state of Washington to visit this congregation for preaching and doing evangelism training prior to our move to Canada. So, when I made the request for these permissions and signatures the participants generally trusted that I would not misuse their data or betray their confidence. Secondly, a large enough percentage of individuals in the group had been in Canada long enough to be familiar with the ubiquitous liability waiver of Western culture, such as this informed consent document, so that they were able to

calm the fears of others who had had less exposure and understanding of such documents. Finally, I explained that the project would consist of three classes and then two trips to the local mall for implementing the evangelistic techniques we would have learned. We discussed the best meeting times for both the classes as well as the evangelism excursions in regards to participants' schedules as well as the availability and presence of Iranian strangers of the community. Then I shared that a final data-gathering meeting would conclude the project.

On the following Saturday, January 13, at the church's worship service, I continued to receive people who were interested in the research project and also collected from them their signed informed consent forms. In total, I received sixteen completed informed consent forms. Nearly everyone who completed a form was willing to give permission for both video and audio recording, though some gave permission for only audio recording, and some refused both. Each of the four participants, however, who completed all of the classes, the evangelism trips, and the concluding interviews and surveys gave permission for both video and audio recordings to be made of themselves. In the end, I did not make use of people's permission given for video recordings; I made only audio recordings of both the individual and group interviews.

For the second half of the month of January, I made a trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand. My mission agency, East-West Ministries International, sent me there to receive discipleship, evangelism, and church planting training. Prior to my departure, I collected the phone numbers of all the participants in my project and distributed to them written schedules including dates and times of the classes, evangelism trips, and the concluding data-collection meeting. Additionally, I urged my wife, who did not go with

me to Chiang Mai, to offer informal assurances to any project participant of the church with whom she spoke that, though I was currently travelling, I would be returning on January 27 and on that day would teach the first class.

Thankfully, the legs of my journey were not delayed from Chiang Mai through Beijing, China so that on January 27 at an earlier hour than scheduled, I landed at the airport in Vancouver, British Columbia. Since it was the day that my first class was scheduled to meet, while still on the tarmac, I began texting all the participants to remind them to attend. Arriving early to the class at the church, I wrote on the room's white board what I planned to teach about the use of poetry in the New Testament. Then fifteen of the sixteen people who submitted informed consent forms arrived. After opening with prayer, I explained the purpose of the project. I then administered the pre-test, which consisted of 23 questions, all of which cumulatively contribute to the evaluation of the second and third components of the cognitive objective for project participants. Since one man stepped out of the class for a telephone call, I received fourteen completed pre-tests. We next read Acts 17:16-34, which is the account of Paul's engagement with a crowd of skeptical listeners in the city of Athens, and we discovered the Bible's precedent for the use of poetry in evangelism. Specifically, in Acts 17:28, Paul quotes Epimenides, a Cretan poet. I had prepared copies of this Bible passage in both English and Farsi for all participants. Then, I cited other occasions in the New Testament in which non-Jewish and non-Christian poets, playwrights, and philosophers are quoted. These instances include Titus 1:12 (Epimenides), Acts 17:28 (Aratus and Cleanthes), and I Cor 15:33 (Meander). Having established evidence for the Scriptural precedent for the use of secular poetry in communicating godly truth, I introduced the poetry from Rumi, which we would be

utilizing in our evangelism. I myself had copied the poetry lines from the poem, *Masnavi*, in my own Farsi handwriting, taking care that the script was legible. After reading through the lines together with the class, I, with the help of a couple of the more knowledgeable students, gave explanation for the more difficult Farsi vocabulary of the poem. I then played a recording of the poetry lines in the Farsi language that I had obtained from a member of the church who had been educated in Iran as a mullah. I played this recording for the class through a set of speakers and amplifier that I had brought with me. At this point in the class, a couple of the participants protested that the poetry's syntax and vocabulary were too antiquated and difficult to be of any use in evangelizing Iranian strangers. Another individual suggested that I not use poetry of the poet, Rumi, but rather of Hafez, another classical Persian poet, believing that Hafez's poetry aligns better with Christian faith than do the lines of poetry of Rumi. Receiving this feedback respectfully, I assured the participants that I was aware of how difficult it is today for Farsi speakers to understand the meaning of the classical poets and that I knew that these poets, including Rumi, were fundamentally Islamic in their core beliefs and teaching. I also pointed out that these aspects of the poetry would be factored into how each of us would answer the project's final question: Is the classical poetry of Rumi useful today among Iranian strangers for helping communicate the gospel? Before one of the participants closed the session in prayer, I assigned everyone to memorize the poetry lines during the upcoming week.

After the first class, I learned that one hour is a very limited amount of time, especially when many people have questions, objections, or are unfamiliar with the material presented, which demands a slower pace of presentation and explanation. So,

prior to the second class held on Saturday, February 3, attended by eleven participants, I removed all but the essential components, which I had planned to teach. After beginning with prayer, I distributed new copies of the poetry lines in case class members had forgotten to bring along their copies from the first class. Next, I divided people into groups of two for reciting to each other the poetry they had memorized during the week. After reassembling the group, I taught participants a tool of sharing one's own Christian testimony. It is called, "15-Second Testimony;" and its name implies how quickly it can be given. The testimony consists of three parts. The first segment describes one's life prior to faith in Jesus with two words. The middle section uses two words to describe one's decisions or actions for trusting in Jesus. The final component employs two words for explaining life with Jesus as one's Savior and Lord. Then, this question concludes the testimony: "Do you have a story like that?" I taught this tool to the participants so that, if it was appropriate in their evangelistic conversations, they would be ready to testify about God's transforming work in their lives.

The next component of the class consisted of instruction about making a transition from a discussion of the poetry lines to sharing the gospel. The transition, which I personally had authored, consisted of two questions. The first was, "Do you know from where the story of these lines of poetry comes?" The answer to this first question is chapters 1 and 2 of The Gospel of Mark (*Injeel Margos*). The second question asked, "Molana (Rumi) and the *Injeel* (the gospels of the New Testament) speak about Jesus as a physical healer and one who forgives sin; do you want this healing and forgiveness?" If the person listening would respond in the affirmative, I then instructed the participants to share the gospel of how Jesus died to give us forgiveness of sin and eternal life. The

method for sharing this message I borrowed from Kevin Greeson, whom I met and received training from in Thailand. He calls it the Korbani Plan of Salvation, and it is specifically tailored for people of a Muslim background. This “gospel share” utilizes Muslims’ general acquaintance with the Old Testament stories and characters, aligns with their acceptance of the integral part of sacrifice in worshipping a holy God, is relationally richer than other more logic-based “gospel shares,” avoids potentially inflammatory vocabulary for people of a Muslim background, and relates specifically to honor-shame oriented cultures verses to guilt-innocence oriented cultures. Twice, I demonstrated this method of sharing the gospel to the class and then had participants practice with each other. After assigning the class members to practice presenting the Korbani Plan of Salvation during the coming week, I closed the class period with prayer.

The third class took place on February 10. The attrition that I had witnessed between the first and second classes continued since to this class session only eight people came. After beginning with prayer, I divided the group into two teams of four to play a game with the facts that I had taught about Rumi. This interactive method of engaging the material assisted project members to retain the information. Then, at the suggestion of class members, I distributed a list of sixteen definitions of the difficult terms from the poetry lines. The same former mullah of Islam that I mentioned previously had again assisted me with this research and scholarship. He had prepared the definitions of the antiquated Farsi words in modern Farsi, and I provided the definitions in English. In the following weeks, when class members did evangelism, they carried this list with them for reference purposes. Next, after reviewing the evangelistic approach that I had taught in the previous two classes, I divided participants into groups of two for

practicing in role-play how we planned to approach Iranian strangers for evangelism in the following two weeks. Before the class dismissed, I made arrangements with the group members for the details of meeting together to do evangelism in the mall. I took time to prepare people for possible hostile responses on the part of those who would be hearing our message. We spent considerable time in prayer asking God to strengthen us with boldness and love for accomplishing the objectives of the following two sessions. One of the class' participants suggested that Iranians typically love receiving gifts and that we could increase favor with the Iranian strangers if we led our encounters offering something. In response to this, I tailored our "standard" approach to consist of the following: 1) offer either a DVD copy of the 1979 *Jesus* film in Farsi or a pamphlet consisting of the gospel of John in Farsi; 2) comment that the gift concerns Jesus Christ whom we believe died and rose from the dead for our salvation; 3) present a small piece of cardstock with the selected poetry lines from Rumi printed on it; 4) read through the lines with the individual or group and summarize what the poem relates, namely, that Jesus heals people physically and forgives their sins; 5) ask this question, "Do you want healing and forgiveness from Jesus?"; 6) if a person listening answers affirmatively, share the basic gospel message using the Korbani Plan of Salvation, which concludes with the two alternatives of Rom 6:23; and 7) in conclusion, ask this question: "If God wanted to give you a gift, would you want to receive it?" This was the standard approach that I taught to the participants. However, I also emphasized that every evangelistic encounter would be unique since the needs, personalities, and responses of each Iranian stranger would be unique. Therefore, willingness to be flexible in approach and sensitivity to the specific leading of the Holy Spirit would be crucially necessary in every



encounter. However, because this project was for the specific purpose of determining the usefulness of Persian poetry in evangelism, I strongly encouraged participants to try always if possible to incorporate the selected lines of Rumi in their interactions with Iranian strangers.

At the suggestion of participants, I switched our scheduled evangelism outreach times from Friday night to Saturday afternoon prior to our church's worship service, which occurs at 4:00 p.m. So, on February 17, at 1:00 p.m., five participants gathered in the food court of The Coquitlam Centre. Iranians from several of the surrounding cities, including Coquitlam, Burnaby, Maple Ridge, Surrey, Port Moody, and Port Coquitlam, frequently visit this mall. I had arrived early and purchased coffee and tea for all of the participants. Those who wanted beverages chose them; we prayed; and we organized ourselves into groups of two for scattering throughout the shopping mall to engage people with the gospel utilizing Persian poetry in the process. One group consisted of two men; one group consisted of two women; the final group consisted of one male participant and myself. After two hours had passed, all participants left the mall. I later met with each of them to collect information about their experience through the teachable moments report.

The second trip to The Coquitlam Centre for evangelism occurred a week later on February 24. Again, we met at 1:00 p.m. in the food court. On this occasion, two participants were in attendance. After purchasing beverages, I briefly reviewed with them our standard evangelistic approach at a table in one of the mall's coffee shops. Then, as a group of three people, one woman and two men, we walked the hallways of the mall for engaging Iranians with the lines of poetry and the gospel. After one hour and twenty

minutes and conversations with numerous Iranian strangers, we disbanded. I later collected information from the two participants on their experience of that event through the teachable moments report.

The implementation stage of my project concluded on Sunday, February 25, when participants assembled in my home. After serving tea and snacks, individuals completed a post-test, which had exactly the same questions as the pre-test had included, which I had administered to project participants at the beginning of the first class. After participants completed the post-test, I asked them to complete a written experiential report. Once these two examinations were completed, the church's assistant pastor sat privately with each participant in order to conduct the individual interviews, which consisted of three questions. After all individual interviews were completed, individuals assembled for the group interview, which was administered by the assistant pastor. Finally, I thanked all of the participants; we ate pizza; and everyone returned to their homes.

The implementation phase of the project concluded with my reviewing the data, organizing the information collected, and saving the recordings and backing them up in secondary and secured locations. I also copied, filed, and saved the statistics collected from the project participants. Once this was completed, I was prepared for doing the data analysis and determining what were the outcomes of the project.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF PROJECT DATA

#### **Evaluation and Assessment Tools**

For gathering data, I used several different approaches in order to increase the credibility of the findings. These diverse methods for participants included a pre-test that I proctored at the beginning of the first class. The second tool was a teachable moments report, which was administered after each of the two evangelism trips to the mall. Thirdly, I utilized an experiential report, an individual interview, a group interview, and a post-test. These four were administered at the data-gathering meeting that happened at the conclusion of the project. For the individual and group interviews, I had obtained permission from all of the participants to make audio recordings. Furthermore, for the sake of obtaining greater objectivity, the church's assistant pastor conducted the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the recordings to produce a detailed written record of what everyone said in response to the various questions.

I chose the pre-test and post-test to measure two of the three cognitive criteria because these two proposed criteria dealt with helping participants grow in factual knowledge. For the third cognitive criterion, I used the experiential report since the purpose aimed at heightened awareness of the dynamics of multicultural communication, a cognitive awareness that was more nuanced than mere factual acquisition.

For assessing the achievement of two of the three affective criteria for participants, I utilized the individual interview rather than the group interview since the

change that these criteria measured was subtle and could have been challenging for people to express. I presupposed that the group interview might suppress the heart change people may or may not have experienced while the individual interview format could offer better opportunity for participants to reflect on and express what inner evolution they may have experienced. To open expression to those individuals less orally inclined, I also measured one affective criterion through the written experiential report. For assessing the overall affective objective that participants would evidence greater eagerness for doing evangelism, I applied two questions also within the experiential report.

All three of the skill criteria dealt with various evangelistic abilities. As a result, I measured one of them through the teachable moments report, which was to be completed immediately after the two evangelism trips. I also confirmed the response of this report through two questions of the experiential report completed by participants at the conclusion of the project. I measured the second skill criterion also through the experiential report. For the final skill criterion, I utilized the individual interview to assess proficiency.

In order to gather personal data, I self-administered a pre-test and a post-test. These tests were for the purpose of measuring cognitive change in myself. The three questions of each examinations directly corresponded to the three personal cognitive criteria. For evaluating the attainment level of the four personal skill criteria, I kept a journal throughout the preparation for and implementation of the project. Also, at the conclusion of the project, I reflected upon and recorded what I perceived as the degree of my achievement of the four personal skill criteria.

To inform interpretation of the project's investigation into the usefulness of Persian poetry, the elements of two instruments were used. From the group interview and from the experiential report I used two questions each. This data contributed to my assessment of the place that poetry may beneficially occupy in the effort to evangelize Iranian strangers.

### **Analysis and Evaluation of Participants' Data**

The first of the three criteria for measuring participants' attainment of the cognitive objective was to demonstrate knowledge of the dynamics of multicultural communication. Participants' responses on the experiential report about whether or not they were sensitive to the culture of the people with whom they spoke showed that they fulfilled this criterion. P1 and P4 answered that they strongly agreed; P3 was neutral; and P2 did not answer the question. When asked the other question that measured knowledge of the dynamics of multicultural communication, participants gave specific examples of how they adjusted their conversation or censored certain topics due to their audience. P1 responded, "We didn't talk about the Qur'an." P3 answered, "I couldn't tell them directly that Jesus is God." And P4 asserted, "I tried not to talk about Islam or any religion. I just tried to talk about Jesus and the truth." P2, again to this question, gave no answer.

The second criterion of participants' cognitive objective was to evidence awareness of the culture of Iran and Shia Islam. Participants' third criterion for their cognitive objective was to become aware of how Rumi presents Jesus in the poem, *Masnavi*. For these two criteria, I taught twenty-three specific facts and tested on these in a pre-test at the start of the first class and in a post-test during the data-gathering session

at the conclusion of the project. For the scoring, I eliminated consideration of participants' answers to question #16 on both the pre-test and post-test since I subsequently deemed the question to be of an overly subjective nature.

With question #16 eliminated from the scoring, the sharpening of participants' knowledge was evaluated through 22 questions. The table below shows the learning that occurred in three of the four participants:

Table 1. Cognitive Change of Participants toward the Stranger's Culture

Cultural Knowledge	P1	P2	P3	P4
Pre-Test	59%	55%	55%	82%
Post-Test	86%	82%	64%	82%
Improvement	27%	27%	9%	0%

The project's second objective for participants was to experience affective change towards the activity of evangelism. I tested for three specific criteria as well as the overarching objective through four questions on the experiential report and two separate queries during the individual interviews. Overall, the results demonstrated that participants grew substantially in their eagerness for doing evangelism.

The first two criteria for affective change were assessed through the individual interviews. The first question asked participants whether, as a result of participating in the project, they were more concerned about non-Christians' estrangement from God. All of the participants answered that, in fact, they now were more concerned. Specifically, P1 said, "Now my mind is completely changed." Answering similarly, P2 said, "I think this

is my responsibility now to share the message, which I have received, with others; and, you know, let them know what I found.”

The second question pertaining to the second affective criterion asked participants if, as a result of participating in the project, they were or would be engaging in more gospel-related conversations. While answering this question, P1 vividly described a significant, inner transformation: “It was a wall between me and the strangers, but now this wall is broken, and I know how to approach them. Thank God!” More reserved on this point of self-assessment, P3 said, “A little bit,” but also commented on realizing the need for a deep conviction of faith and honed biblical knowledge if one hoped to do evangelism successfully. P2 answered positively and gave an example of evangelism with which P2 was currently involved. P4 said, “Yes, for sure.”

The third criterion of affective change was whether or not participants were able to express to an Iranian stranger their love for Jesus and their salvation. The results of the measurement of this criterion were positive since P1 and P4 strongly agreed and P2 and P3 agreed that they had been able to communicate these deep feelings to at least one stranger. Additionally, when asked how they gave their testimony or how they expressed their love for Jesus, P2 said, “I told them my story about how Jesus helped me through my messed-up life and the feeling that I am getting from the Holy Spirit.” The responses of P1, P3, and P4 similarly confirmed that participants were able to express to strangers the positive feelings that resulted from their Christian faith. P1 said, “I tried to let them know what was the difference between my life before and after believing to Jesus Christ.” P3 explained, “We were loving them, and talked with them kindly. Also giving

them gifts and saying that Christianity is not a religion.” P4 simply answered, “I just talked about how Jesus changed my life.”

In addition to measuring the three criteria, I also asked two questions within the experiential report that pertained directly to the overall affective objective. The answers to these two questions as well as the answers to the three affective criteria are found in the table below:

Table 2. Affective Change of Participants toward Doing Evangelism

Affective Change	P1	P2	P3	P4
Felt Compassion for Others’ Estrangement from God	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
More Often Engaging in Gospel-Related Conversations	Yes	Yes	“A Little Bit”	Yes
Successfully Communicated One’s Feelings about Salvation	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
More Likely to Evangelize in the Future	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree
More Confident to Approach Strangers for Evangelism	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Agree

For assessing the achievement of the skill objective for participants, I utilized the teachable moments report, the experiential report, and the individual interview for participants. The data show that participants did develop skill in approaching and



initiating conversation with Iranian strangers. For several of the participants of the project, these were new learned behaviors and represented for them a significant breakthrough, giving them joy in their obedience to Jesus' commandment to preach the gospel. All four participants succeeded in speaking with Iranian strangers. Additionally, every one of the participants shared the Persian poetry of Rumi with Iranian strangers, utilizing the specific lines we had prepared. When it was required, the participants also used the definitions sheet I had provided to help them explain to the stranger the meaning of some of the more difficult vocabulary in the poetry.

For the third criterion of the skill objective, however, participants' responses were more mixed. Though all of the participants attempted to transition from a discussion of the lines of Rumi to speaking about the Christian gospel, the majority of participants found this difficult to do successfully. Only one participant, P4, declared unequivocal success in his attempts to move from poetry to speaking about who Jesus is and what he did. But, even this participant admitted that a discussion of Persian poetry with a stranger who knows the poetry well is usually not helpful for getting to a discussion of the gospel. P4 explained that if an Iranian knows classical Persian poetry well, that individual is often a Muslim Sufi. Such people usually are entrenched firmly in an Islamic view of Jesus, even though the works of their favorite poets such as Rumi initially appear to push the boundaries of that view. Possibly, P2 made the most succinct assessment clarifying why the lines of Rumi failed to assist the evangelists in sharing the gospel. This participant stated, "If someone is bookish and reads books, they will know that Molana or Rumi, he said Mohammed more than the name of Jesus in his book. And if they were not bookish, then they can't understand that poetry, and it's not useful." P2 claimed that

those Iranians who are able to understand the antiquated vocabulary and syntax of classical poetry will also know that the classical poets were Sufi and Islamic, even though they have lines of poetry, which, when isolated, seem to align with Christian doctrine. Opening a discussion about this poetry with such a classically educated individual will not benefit the evangelist's effort to present the Jesus of the Bible. The alternative, P2 explained, is to encounter an Iranian stranger who is simply unable to grasp the meaning of the archaic language. The evangelist will waste precious time in simply attempting to explain the poem's meaning, while more productive approaches could have been employed. P1 had a similar assessment and said, "The thing is that the understanding of this poetry for people was a little difficult."

The table below shows how participants successfully demonstrated skill in doing evangelism, but also displays their dubious assessment of sharing the Christian message by means of the selected lines of poetry:

Table 3. Skill Development of Participants in Doing Evangelism Using Persian Poetry

Skill	P1	P2	P3	P4
I Spoke with Iranian Strangers	True	True	True	True
The Number of Strangers with whom I Spoke	7	2	10	3
The Number of Strangers with whom I Shared Rumi's Poetry	7	1	10	3
I was Able to Transition from Rumi's Poetry to Sharing the Gospel	Mixed Response	No	Mixed Response	Yes

The greatest benefit resulting from the project for participants was the evangelism itself. Whether poetry or some other method was utilized was inconsequential in relation to this outcome. Merely the fact that Iranian believers who were previously not doing evangelism were trained, challenged, and led in sharing their faith with Iranian strangers was significant. This is what participants cited was for them the greatest result of their involvement in the project. P3 said, "About me, it was my first serious evangelism, because I did before but not so seriously. It was really good." P1 similarly testified, "I learned how to approach the people. So now I feel more comfortable to talk to people like a stranger in the mall or somewhere else."

### **Analysis and Evaluation of Personal Data**

For myself, I had a cognitive and skill objective. The first criterion of the cognitive objective was understanding the dynamics unique to cross-cultural communication. I have experience with this topic since I lived and worked as a missionary for seven years in Mexico. I went through culture shock myself and saw others go through it. I have experienced and witnessed how words and meaning can be misinterpreted across barriers of language and culture. I am familiar with how cultural values shape behavioral responses in differing situations, often to the shock of the people of a varying cultural code.

For the last three years, I have worked among Iranians in the United States of America and in Canada. Among this people group, I am the individual who is situated more comfortably in the host culture; and the Iranians with whom I interact are in foreign territory ethnically, religiously, politically, and linguistically. Because of my experience

living in Mexico, I better am able to empathize with them. I understand the frustrations of not knowing how to pay an electric or telephone bill and the incomprehensibility of technical and legal language. I know how it is even difficult to understand the fast-talking clerk at the grocery store. I remember the tendency to read constantly the news about one's homeland, the ongoing longing for family and friends, and the prejudices one endures as a minority.

One example of this is the perception held by some of the Iranians of the church that I now attend in Coquitlam, Canada. Though these Iranians have nearly perfect English and have lived in Canada for more than a decade, they still assume that they will be misunderstood and less trusted by the church board, which issues our Iranian church's rental agreement, than I would be as a Caucasian American. Though these Iranians have a much longer relationship with the people of this church than I have, they nevertheless want me to meet and negotiate with the board. Their assumptions have not arisen without cause but have come from their experiences and perceptions developed during the years of their tenure in Canada and, in particular, through their interactions with this board of Caucasian Christians. Cultural differences are challenging even in the face of something so fundamental as shared religious allegiance.

One of the unique aspects of Iranian culture of which I have become aware is the concept of *taarof*. *Taarof* is an elaborate system of etiquette, which demands particular verbal and behavior responses in specific situations and settings. For example, when approaching any door, it is rude simply to step forward and to enter before your companion. There is a verbal and even physical jostling, which routinely occurs at any door before two Iranians can agree on who should enter first. I was especially struck by

this cultural difference when two Iranian friends rode away from a shopping mall with my family and me in our car. My wife, kids, and I were already seated in the automobile while our Iranian companions remained outside the car filing through a system of polite phrases telling one another that the other one deserved the front seat. What I am accustomed to is exactly the opposite: taking for oneself what one wants. The first person who shouts, “Shotgun,” gets to sit in the front passenger seat and everyone else can find one of the less desirable places. But, because Iran is an honor-shame culture with a system of *taarof*, among my Iranian friends the opposite occurs.

Another aspect of *taarof* is the expectation on hosts to serve tea the moment that a guest arrives. Therefore, tea should be prepared in advance. Additionally, food in excessive amounts should always be offered. If a guest stays for more than an hour, the host should be ready to serve a full meal. Once someone enters an Iranian home, that person comes under the full protection of the host. There are also demands on the guest. The first time that a visitor arrives to a home, a valuable gift should be brought, usually a platter or a set of dishes but never less than pastries or flowers. While in Western circles similar parameters of etiquette exist, in Iranian relationships the rules are more rigid and the stakes are higher.

In summary, my awareness of cultural dynamics did increase through the course of this project. The scholarly literature I engaged also contributed to my sensitization to the issues contained within multicultural communication. Though I previously had had intimate involvement with cross-cultural dynamics through my experiences in Mexico, this project enhanced my awareness of the myriad of issues involved with this subject and furthered my sensitivity in particular to Iranian culture.

The second criterion as to my progress in becoming conversant with the issues within multicultural communication concerned my awareness of how Iranians respond to strangers. One word captures the bulk of the answer to this question: suspicion. When the evangelists, whom I trained with methods for sharing the gospel, entered the marketplace to meet Iranian strangers, they were speaking to people of a similar cultural background. However, one of the major differences between the evangelist and his or her audience was the two people's religious allegiance. There probably was the perception on the part of the Iranian stranger that the Iranian Christian was somehow less Iranian and less honorable, because he or she was no longer following Islam. Not only does apostasy deserve death according to the Qur'an, but also, due to the tense relations between the Iranian and Western governments, a Christian may be perceived as a traitor to Western culture. Furthermore, Iranians continuously speculate about the meddling of Western government agencies, like the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. Has someone financially rewarded this Iranian evangelist who is now hawking Christianity? Questions were also likely to arise in the Iranian stranger's mind as to the authenticity of the evangelist's faith since some Iranians become Christian to achieve refugee status in Western countries. Though there were not insurmountable cultural differences between the Iranian evangelist and his or her audience, suspicion and dissimilarity nevertheless needed to be overcome for the conversation to have achieved its purpose. Further cultural dynamics such as *taarof* were navigated since almost inevitably Iranian strangers will present a veneer of politeness but inwardly harbor significant misgiving and wariness.

The third criterion of my cognitive objective pertained to my familiarity with the Persian poet, Rumi. Over the course of the project, I became more knowledgeable of

numerous classical Persian poets, their poetry's archaic syntax and vocabulary, the milieu of Sufism out of which this literature arises, and how this poetry is appropriated by Iranians today. In particular, I learned about Rumi. Prior to this project, I only knew that he was associated with Iranian culture and the whirling dervishes of Sufism. I knew none of Rumi's poetry and had no idea about his significance either among Iranians nor in the broader world. This changed as I studied for this project and became substantially more familiar with this popular poet, mystic, and theologian. Additionally, I memorized the selected lines of his poem, *Masnavi*, which the evangelists and I used in introducing Iranian strangers to a discussion about Jesus Christ.

The skill-oriented objective for me in this project was to demonstrate competency in training Iranian Christians to use lines of poetry for the purpose of introducing the gospel. Four criteria measured whether or not this target was reached. The first pertained to the completion of my teaching a set of classes pertaining to Persian culture and the poet, Rumi. This criterion was met during the implementation phase of this project. The second criterion was for me to teach the students how to share their own testimony and the basic gospel message. I achieved this criterion by teaching the students how to speak of God's work in their lives through the "15-Second Testimony" and how to speak of the gospel using the Korbani Plan of Salvation. The third criterion measured whether or not I gave opportunity for the students to practice doing evangelism in the method of role-play. This criterion was fulfilled during the second and third classroom sessions. Finally, facilitating the Iranian Christians to go to a public place for using Persian poetry in evangelism was the fourth criterion for the achievement of my skill objective. This criterion was satisfied by the group's two outings to The Coquitlam Center, my

leadership for the participants on those occasions, and the evangelism using Persian poetry that they did.

### **Analysis and Evaluation of Project Data**

I would make two changes if I were to have the opportunity to repeat this project. First, the general invitation to the entire congregation of Nejat Church had the virtue of increasing the project's credibility. It showed that I was open to any volunteer who wanted to participate and that I was not trying to favor a particular outcome for the project. So, I would do the same thing again. However, after volunteers would attend the first session and understand what is involved for them to participate in the project, I would require whoever wanted to continue to sign a statement of commitment. This hopefully would serve to limit the amount of attrition of participants that I experienced during my project's implementation.

The second change I would suggest if anyone were to perform a project like mine would be to hold longer class sessions. I had planned to teach more about evangelism from two passages of Scripture, Rom 10:14-16 and 1 Pt 3:13-16. I had prepared these selected texts in both English and Farsi as motivation for the class to engage the daunting work of approaching complete strangers with the message of the Christian gospel. However, because of limited class time, I needed to excise this instruction about the Scripture texts concerning evangelism. If I were to do the project again, I would like to have the time to include this instruction. Additionally, all of my project's participants spoke English as a second language, though I taught the classes in English and not in Farsi. This factor also should be considered when planning the length of class time



required. Finally, Iranians value relationships over efficiency so that they are oriented more toward people than tasks. This also contributes to the advisability of offering a more relaxed pace in the classroom.

I chose lines from the poet, Rumi, because his poetry was very concrete in its description of events involving Jesus. The lines from other poets that I considered were often beautiful and congruent with Christian doctrine but were more abstract in their meaning. The more concrete language of Rumi I predicted would be less open to debate and multiple meanings. The lines that I chose narrated specific miracles from the life of Jesus that aligned directly with what the biblical gospels report. Rumi's source was not the Qur'an. This was a clear advantage for using Rumi. However, a future project may possibly fruitfully examine the use of poetry lines from other sources like Hafez, Saadi, Ferdowsi, or others. Potentially, students could be trained with selections from several poets and, after trying them in the mission field, could report the benefits and disadvantages of each one.

A further idea for what might be included in training sessions of a project similar to this one would be apologetic responses to potential objections from Iranian strangers. One of the most common questions an Iranian will raise when confronted with the gospel concerns the reliability of the Bible. A solid answer defending against the accusation that the Bible is corrupted because it has been changed is necessary for success in evangelism among Iranians. If I were to add another class session to my training, I would include an apologetic defense on this topic as well as an explanation for the historicity of Jesus' death on the cross, which is another Biblical claim that Muslims often deny.

The participants concluded that the selected poetry lines of Rumi were a mixed blessing in the effort to proclaim the gospel to Iranian strangers. The complexity of the poetry's grammar and syntax were immediately daunting. About an Iranian stranger encountering the poetry, P1 said, "But when normally they see the poem, I realize that it is difficult for them to understand." The evangelist producing a second paper with a list of definitions for obtuse vocabulary within the poem is tedious, and it makes the encounter overly complicated.

The second issue arising from the poetry I chose is its author, who brings a liability for the evangelist's purpose. Rumi, in the end, is a Muslim, even if one who is unorthodox and mystical. If confronted with this fact, the evangelist will have to admit its truth, which will not help move the conversation in a productive direction. Furthermore, some Iranians use the classical poets, including Rumi, in *Irfan*, a gnostic branch in Shia Islam. When people of *Irfan* meet Christian evangelists, who may be familiar only with the poetry lines presented but raised the topic anyway, the evangelists may have trouble bringing the conversation back to the gospel. This scenario happened to two evangelists in this project. On another occasion, an Iranian man, approached by this project's evangelists in the shopping mall, refused to consider the lines of poetry because of Rumi himself. P3 reported that this elderly man said, "In one poem, Molana said he accept science. In another poem, he wrote, he rejects science." Then, P3 related what was the outcome, "So, the man said Molana doesn't know what he's talking about."

Another complication of the poetry is its openness to multiple interpretations. P4 admitted, "But, unfortunately, there is a different way to meaning any poem." P1 personally experienced this fact when sending this projects' poetry lines of Rumi to a

family member who is not a Christian. P1 asked this family member to translate the lines, hoping that while doing so the family member would be confronted with the true identity of Jesus. P1 was disappointed in the result because the family member found an Islamic-friendly translation:

[This family member] Googled and found some translation, but that translation, whoever translated, tried to direct it to the Qur'an and Islam sources, and even one word, which meaning 'sin,' they changed it. They said, 'This means sin, but here it has another meaning.' So, they want to tell Muslim people, turn it, and say, 'OK, no, Jesus cannot forgive your sin.' This is the way they are trying.

Despite these considerable drawbacks, the selected lines of Rumi used in this project sometimes proved to be a helpful bridge to sharing the gospel with Iranian strangers. One of this project's participants concluded that the poetry lines were probably not a primary tool for the evangelist but a tool nonetheless worth keeping for the opportune situation. P1 explained, "Poem is something else, another tool, another key. If we can use it in the right place, maybe help us to go forward in our conversation." Another participant, P4, came to a similar conclusion and said, "Helpful if you use it the right time, the right conversation to approaching people. But if you start, something like that, but you have to know when you can use it exactly, when, that is important." About the poetry's usefulness, P3 expressed ambiguously, "It was not helpful, but helped a little."

The table below displays the participants' reserved endorsements:

Table 4. The Usefulness of Persian Poetry in Evangelizing Iranians

Poetry's Usefulness	P1	P2	P3	P4
The Poetry Was Distracting or Unhelpful	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
The Effect of the Poetry in the Conversation	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Harmful nor Helpful	Neither Harmful nor Helpful	Somewhat Helpful

### Conclusion

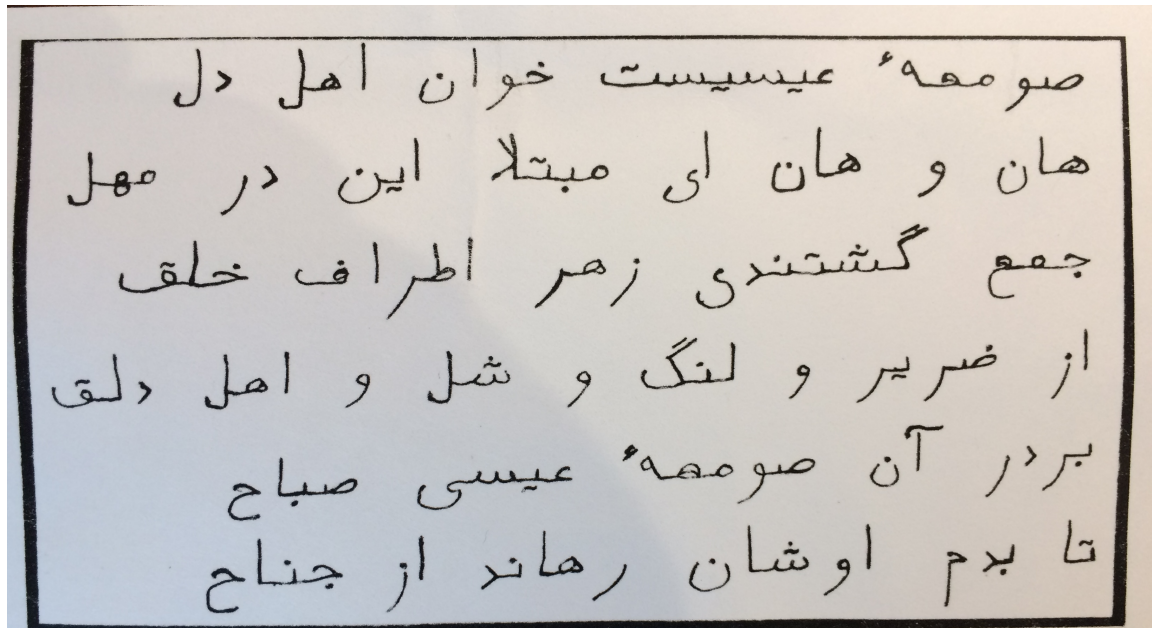
B. Neil Woodhouse's article in *Missiology: An International Review* ignited my ideas for the possibilities of this project. In a specific context and on limited scale, I field-tested his hypothesis that Persian poetry could assist in the cause of Christian evangelism. The results of my study were not conclusive. The project's participants often discovered some benefits resulting from their use of the Rumi lines, but they also met numerous and significant obstacles that arose due to the poetry. Other researches may choose profitably to continue the investigation of the utility of Persian poetry for evangelism among Iranians possibly in other contexts, with different poetry, and using alternative approaches.

What is not disputed is the essential goodness of this project's outcomes. Christian Iranians were equipped for and led in doing evangelism. For the majority of the participants, this event marked a significant progression in their preparation for and obedience to Jesus' mandate to proclaim the gospel. Secondly, numerous Iranians of the Canadian diaspora heard the good news of God's love for them in Jesus Christ. They

considered the lines of one of their own classical poets extolling the wonder of *Isa Massee* (Jesus Christ), and they were challenged to repent from their sin and believe the good news. May God use these activities to continue the ingathering of millions of Iranians to his kingdom.

APPENDIX 1

SELECTED LINES OF RUMI'S *MASNAVI*



## APPENDIX 2

### DEFINITIONS OF VOCABULARY FROM SELECTED LINES OF RUMI'S

#### MASNAVI

synagogue	عبادت گاه	صومعه
place to eat	محل عبادت	هوان
person looking for truth	سفره	اهل دل
alert	صاحب معرفت، حقیقت طلب	هان دهان
love	بگوش باش، بیدار باش	مبتلا
sick	نیازمند، کسی که بیمار است، عاشق است	مربل
not sleeping	غافل نشوی/آهسته	خلق
people	مردم	ضدیر
blind	کور، نابینا (ناقص از چشم)	لنگ
lame	ناتوانی در پا	شل
lame	ناتوانی در پا	اهل دلق
Pharisee/hypocrite	مردم ریاکار و تبه است	صبح
morning	صبح	یدم
breath	به نفس	اوشان
they/them	ایشان را	رخاند
free	آزاد کند	جناح
sin	گناه	

### APPENDIX 3

#### POETRY INTRODUCTION, TRANSITION, AND THE KORBANI PLAN OF SALVATION GOSPEL SHARE

Have you ever seen these lines from Molana's *Masnavi*?  
[Show poetry.]

Do you know where this story comes from?  
*Injeel—Margos 2:1-12*

The *Masnavi* and the *Injeel* say that God can forgive and heal us through Jesus.

Do you want that?

Let me show you something... [Draw schematic.]

God made Adam and Eve holy. But when they did one sin they became unholy. They were separated from God.

Then God killed an animal to give clothing to Adam and Eve to cover their shame.

Their son, Abel, also worshiped God by killing a lamb.

Likewise, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets killed lambs as sacrifices for their sin.

700 years before Jesus, the prophet, Isaiah, said one was coming who would be born of a virgin (Is 7:14). But, he also prophesied that this one would suffer and die like a sacrificed lamb (Is 53).

When the prophet, John, saw Jesus, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29).

Jesus was born from a virgin. He never sinned. He never killed anyone. Though he was only 30 years old, he predicted his death. He said would be a ransom for many. Then, he was crucified, but three days later he rose from the dead.



So, there is BAD NEWS and GOOD NEWS (Rom 6:23):

The BAD NEWS is that... the **WAGES** of **SIN** is **DEATH**.  
By our sins we have earned death. Even one sin separates us  
from God so that we die.

But the GOOD NEWS is that... the **GIFT** of **GOD** is **ETERNAL LIFE**.  
God sacrificed Jesus, the Lamb of God, so that we can live.

If God wanted to give you a gift, would you want to take it?

Well, God does want to give you this gift. To accept it, you must repent from  
your sin and believe this good news. Do you want to do that now?

## APPENDIX 4

### FACTS TAUGHT ABOUT IRANIAN CULTURE, RUMI, AND HIS POEM, *MASNAVI*

- Molana was born 1207 AD / 586 Jalali (Iranian) / 604 Hijri (Islamic).
- Born in Afghanistan.
- Lived most of his life in Turkey, 1228-1273 (at his death).
- The *Masnavi* records Jesus' forgiveness of people's sins.
- The *Masnavi* does not say Jesus is the Son of God.
- The *Masnavi* presents Jesus as a healer.
- The *Masnavi* talks about the breath of Jesus.
- The *Masnavi* says Jesus is the "good way."
- The *Masnavi* refers to Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the healing of the paralytic.
- In the lines we learned there is a clear reference to Mark 2:1-12.
- Molana was a Muslim.
- Molana did not believe Jesus is God.
- Molana does say that if people want the truth they should go to Jesus.
- Molana was not a Christian.
- Shia Islam says that Jesus is a prophet.
- Today, most Iranians are more secular than Muslim.
- Shia Muslims do not accept the Lordship and ultimate authority of Jesus.
- Shia Islam of Iran claims there to be 12 imams.
- The name of the returning imam is Mahdi.
- Hossein was killed on the Plains of Karbala.
- Imam Reza is buried in Mashhad.
- Gom is the theological center of Iran.
- Zoroastrianism predated Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Iran.

## APPENDIX 5

### PRE- AND POST-TEST ON IRANIAN CULTURE, RUMI, AND HIS POEM,

#### *MASNAVI*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

1. In which year was Rumi (Molana) born?  
A) 1207 AD / 586 Jalali (Iranian) / 604 Hijri (Islamic)  
B) 1286 AD / 665 Jalali (Iranian) / 685 Hijri (Islamic)  
C) 1301 AD / 680 Jalali (Iranian) / 701 Hijri (Islamic)  
D) 1372 AD / 751 Jalali (Iranian) / 774 Hijri (Islamic)
2. In which modern-day country was Rumi (Molana) born?  
A) Iran    B) Iraq    C) Afghanistan    D) Kuwait    E) Turkey
3. In which modern-day country did Rumi (Molana) live most of his life?  
A) Iran    B) Iraq    C) Afghanistan    D) Kuwait    E) Turkey
4. Which story from Jesus' life is included in the *Masnavi*, by Rumi (Molana)?  
A) The angels' singing to the shepherds at Jesus' birth  
B) Jesus' forgiveness of people's sins  
C) Jesus' last supper with his disciples  
D) Jesus' crucifixion on the cross
5. The *Masnavi*, written by Rumi (Molana), presents Jesus as the Son of God.  
A) True    B) False
6. The *Masnavi*, written by Rumi (Molana), presents Jesus as a great healer.  
A) True    B) False
7. The *Masnavi*, by Rumi (Molana), talks about the breath of Jesus.  
A) True    B) False
8. The *Masnavi*, written by Rumi (Molana), claims that Jesus is the way, like John in the Bible claims that Jesus is the way.  
A) True    B) False

9. Do you know any stories of Jesus that are recorded in the *Masnavi*, by Rumi (Molana)?

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10. To which specific text in the Bible do the *Masnavi* stories of Jesus' miracles relate?

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11. Rumi (Molana) was a Muslim.

A) True      B) False

12. Rumi (Molana) believed that Jesus is God.

A) True      B) False

13. Rumi (Molana) in the *Masnavi* tells people who want the truth to go to Jesus.

A) True      B) False

14. Rumi (Molana) was a Christian.

A) True      B) False

15. Shia Islam claims that Jesus is:

A) God      B) Prophet      C) Criminal

16. Today, most Iranians are:

A) More secular than Muslim      B) More Muslim than secular

17. Do Shia Muslims accept the Lordship and ultimate authority of Jesus?

A) Yes      B) No

18. The Shia Islam of the Islamic Republic of Iran claims there to be how many imams?

A) 3      B) 7      C) 9      D) 12      E) 13

19. What is the name of the imam who is expected to return when the world ends?

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20. Whom does Shia Islam claim to have been innocently murdered on the Plains of

Karbala?

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20. Which imam is buried in Mashhad, Iran?

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22. What city is the Islamic theological center of Iran?

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23. What major religion pre-dated Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Iran?

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APPENDIX 6

TEACHABLE MOMENTS REPORT

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

How many Iranian strangers did I speak with today?

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX 7  
EXPERIENTIAL REPORT

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

1. In my evangelistic conversations, I spoke to Iranian strangers.

TRUE                      FALSE

2. In both weeks, how many Iranian strangers did you talk to?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. In both weeks, with how many Iranian strangers did you share the poetry of Molana (Rumi)?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. When I spoke with Iranians, I showed sensitivity to their culture.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE

5. Were there things you did say or did not say because the person with whom you were speaking was Iranian?

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6. The lines of Rumi (Molana) were distracting or unhelpful for the purpose of evangelism.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE

7. During evangelism, I was able to express my love for Jesus and for my salvation.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE

8. Because of this evangelism training and experience, I will be more likely in the future to tell people about my love for Jesus.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE

9. What effect on the evangelistic conversation did the poetry of Molana (Rumi) have?

The poetry was...

1
Very Harmful
2
Somewhat Harmful
3
Neither Harmful Nor Helpful
4
Somewhat Helpful
5
Very Helpful

10. Because of this evangelism training and experience, I am more confident in approaching strangers for the purpose of evangelism.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE



11. With the Iranian strangers, how did you express your love for Jesus or give your testimony?

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## APPENDIX 8

### INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. After the training and evangelism that we did, do you feel that you are more concerned about non-Christian's estrangement from God? (Do you think you have greater compassion for them?)
2. Were you able to move from a discussion of the poetry of Molana (Rumi) to sharing the message of Jesus and the gospel?
3. Are you engaging more often in gospel-related conversations (or do you think that in the future you will) because of having had this training and evangelism experience?

## APPENDIX 9

### GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What seemed to be the reaction of the person listening when you shared the poetry lines? Did the poetry have a positive or negative effect on that person?
2. From this training and practice what was the most important thing you learned?
3. Do you think using lines of poetry from Molana (Rumi) was helpful for trying to share the gospel? Why or why not?

APPENDIX 10

FAITH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

RESEARCH PROJECT APPROVAL

**AT8591 Approved IRB for De Lange Research Project**

FROM: James Tille <notifications@instructure.com>

TO: Ray De Lange <delange157@gmail.com>

**December 22, 2017**

Ray, DMin Candidate,

This e-mail serves as official notice that the FIU IRB has granted you approval to conduct your research project: TRAINING IRANIAN CHRISTIANS TO USE PERSIAN POETRY IN EVANGELISM. Please, place this e-mail as an appendix to indicate clearly that the IRB was conducted. Also, follow all the procedures for any changes to the project that require a notification to the IRB and also for renewal of the IRB approval should the project extend beyond the one-year deadline of 13 December 2018.

Blessings in Your Endeavors,

Dr. Tille

## APPENDIX 11

### PROJECT PARTICIPANTS' INFORMED CONSENT FORM

<p>FAITH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY &amp; FAITH SEMINARY Institutional Review Board</p>
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**Projected Informed Consent Document Template (Form 2c)  
(Submitted by Candidate for IRB)**

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited to participate in a **research study** on the use of Persian poetry in doing evangelism. You will be asked to attend classes, approach strangers for doing evangelism, and report your findings on a questionnaire, by individual interview, and group interview.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately five weeks.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks associated with this study are discomfort in approaching strangers and personal rejection while doing evangelism. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are gaining skills and developing confidence for doing evangelism. **We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.**

**PAYMENTS:** You will receive no payment for your participation.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your **participation is voluntary** and you have the **right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate.** You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Technical Advisor, Dr. James A. Tille, at 253-752-2020, extension 141.

**Independent Contact:** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Faith International University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to speak to someone independent of the research team at (253) 752-2020 or toll free at 1-888-777-7675, or email at [doctoral.admin@faithseminary.edu](mailto:doctoral.admin@faithseminary.edu). You can also write to the Faith Seminary IRB, Faith International University, 3404 N. Pearl Street, Tacoma, WA 98407.

Indicate **Yes** or **No**:

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

\_\_\_Yes\_\_\_No

I give consent to be videotaped during this study:

\_\_\_Yes\_\_\_No

**The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.**

**SIGNATURE** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE** \_\_\_\_\_

**Print name of participant** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 12

### REQUEST FOR PROJECT PERMISSION FROM NEJAT CHURCH

November 25, 2017

Massoud Sadeghi  
Pastor  
Nejat Church  
2665 Runnel Drive  
Coquitlam, BC V3E 1S3  
Canada

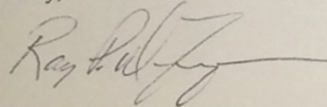
Dear Pastor Massoud Sadeghi,

As a graduate student in the apologetics department at Faith International University and Faith Seminary of Tacoma, Washington, I am conducting research as a part of the requirements for a doctor of ministry degree. The title of my research project is "Training Iranian Christians to Use Persian Poetry in Evangelism" and the purpose of my research is to train a selected group of Iranian Christians from Nejat Church of Coquitlam, B.C., Canada to use Persian poetry in evangelism.

I am writing to request your permission to involve volunteers from Nejat Church in this research project. Participants will be asked to attend classes of evangelism training and then practice evangelism in the community. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,



Ray De Lange  
Pastor

## APPENDIX 13

### PROJECT PERMISSION FROM NEJAT CHURCH



2665 Runnel Drive  
Coquitlam, BC V3E 1S3 Canada  
Tel: (425) 988-3578  
e-mail: iran@njatchurch.com

December 6, 2017

Dear Pastor De Lange,

Thank you for your letter of November 25, 2017 regarding evangelism research as part of the requirements for a doctoral program in ministry. Your proposal of using Persian Poetry in Evangelism seems appropriate and believed to be an effective tool to win Persian-speaking people to Christ.

You have my approval to study and train the interested individuals at the Nejat Church in Coquitlam, BC for this evangelism ministry.

Sincerely,

Rev. Massoud Sadeghi  
Pastor, Nejat Church

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## PERSONAL DATA SHEET

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EDUCATION:

Master of Divinity from Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
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Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies from Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan  
in 1997

POSITIONS SERVED:

Church Planting Catalyst, New Westminster Christian Reformed Church,  
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada from 2017 through this project

Church Planting Catalyst, East-West Ministries International, Plano, Texas from  
2015 to 2017

Missionary Pastor, Rey de Reyes Iglesia Presbiteriana, Guadalajara, Mexico, sent  
by Community Bible Church, Swansea, Illinois from 2008 to 2015

Pastor, Christ's Community Church, Chandler, Arizona from 2002 to 2008